

WONDERLAND



M.T. SABRE
NEVER AFTER NEVERLAND

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WONDERLAND

Wonderland

MASON SABRE



To all of you who want a little bit of wonder back in their life

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Chapter One

ALICE

YOU KNOW what's the absolute worst thing you can do when life's kicking your arse? Ask the universe, "What else you got?" Because trust me, that cosmic bastard will answer, and you'll regret ever opening your smart-arse mouth. But honestly? Sometimes, the universe isn't all bad—it just likes to surprise you when you least expect it.

So here I am—Alice-freaking-Kingsleigh—standing at King's Cross Station, fresh off the train from Edinburgh. My body's screaming for a stretch, but my mind's too wired to care. I've put off this trip home for years, always finding some excuse. Now, I'm face-to-face with that mythical space between platforms nine and ten, and I can't help but smirk.

Little Alice used to stand right here, eyes wide with wonder, whispering, "Please be real." Now? I roll my eyes at my own nostalgia. But damn, if a part of me doesn't still wish I could dive headfirst into that brick wall and end up somewhere—anywhere—else. Who says you can't hang onto a bit of magic, even as an adult?

Fiction's a hell of a drug, isn't it? Fairy tales and fantasies—they're like a warm blanket when reality's kicking you in the teeth. They let you dream, let you escape... until they spit you back out into the mess of the real world. But even knowing that, I still can't help but want to hang onto that little bit of wonder.

I take a deep breath, the air thick with the festive scent of pumpkin spice, apples, and cinnamon. Tomorrow's Halloween, and the whole place

feels like it's wrapped up in some kind of autumn magic. A part of me just wants to ditch the heavy stuff, grab the biggest, most ridiculous chai latte, and lose myself in a café for a bit. Or maybe sketch something. I haven't done that in years, but right now, it feels like the right kind of whimsy.

How long's it been since I was last here? Two years? Three? I'm not usually the daughter who avoids home, but life happens, doesn't it? There's always tomorrow, next week, next month. Then boom—another year's gone, and you're still making excuses.

The reason for this impromptu visit? Gran died last week.

She was... magical. Soft hands, warm hugs, and eyes that sparkled with mischief. She bought me my first fantasy book and always told me the world was full of magic if you just knew where to look. "You just have to find it, Alice," she'd say, like she had all the world's secrets tucked away behind that twinkle in her eye. Dementia took her from us five years ago, and I think that's why I've stayed away. Seeing her... not herself? That was never part of the plan.

I hitch my backpack higher and drag my suitcase towards the subway. London's chaos wraps around me, loud and alive, and for a moment, I feel like I'm slipping back into an old rhythm.

I pause, chewing my lip. That café is seriously calling my name. Mum would lose her mind—"Your grandmother's dead, and you're off getting a coffee?" she'd screech—but Gran? She'd be all for it. She'd order the biggest, sweetest monstrosity on the menu and remind me to enjoy the little moments. "Life's too short not to," she'd say, and she'd be right.

But before I can decide, something catches my eye—a flash of white. A waistcoat. A hurried, scurrying walk. My heart skips a beat, and I freeze.

No way. No freaking way.

I'm Alice, with her wild imagination and her head forever stuck in the clouds. That's what Mum always said. "Alice, stop dreaming. Those fantasies will get you nowhere." But here's the thing—I'm not imagining this.

I blink, rub my eyes, and look again. There, darting across the station concourse, is a white rabbit. Or... is it?

I whirl around, heart pounding, and there he is—a man, maybe in his fifties, with white hair, wearing a waistcoat, checking his watch as he rushes past.

For a second, just a second, I'm tempted to follow him. To see where this rabbit hole might lead.

But I'm not that Alice anymore. I'm twenty-three, all grown up, with a funeral to attend and no time for whimsical detours.

Still... I can't help but grin. Maybe, just maybe, there's a little wonder left in this world after all.

I square my shoulders, grip the handle of my suitcase, and stride forward.

It's time to face the wicked witch.

Chapter Two

HOOK

PIXIE DUST. Of all the things in this world, I'm stuck relying on pixie dust. "Come on, darling," I mutter, tapping my hook against the table. The metal clangs, louder than the silence in the room. Wendy's hunched over, fussing with the pouch like it's some kind of delicate flower. It's dust. Shake it, toss it, open the portal. Not exactly rocket science.

"This isn't as simple as you think, Hook," she bites back, not even looking up.

I roll my eyes. "Of course it's not, love. Everything with you is a meticulous ballet, isn't it? Can't just get things done, can we? Gotta drag it out, make it a grand affair. Why rush when Smee could be lost in Wonderland forever?"

She huffs, shaking out some of the dust, trying to focus like she's in the middle of performing heart surgery. It's almost laughable—if it wasn't wasting so much damn time.

I get up, pacing the room, my boots heavy on the floor. "It's pixie dust, sweetheart, not an enchanted bomb. Flick your wrist, open the portal, and let's get on with it."

"You think it's that easy?" she snaps.

I stop pacing and lean in close. "Yes, love, I do." My voice drops to a growl. "Because every second we're stuck here playing, Smee's sinking deeper into that madhouse of a world. And I didn't send my first mate to fetch some magic trinket just to lose him to their madness." My fist

clenches, the leather of my glove creaking. “That amulet’s the only thing keeping Neverland from crumbling into fairy dust, and I’ll be damned if I let it slip away because you can’t sprinkle some pixie powder.”

She finally looks up at me, eyes blazing with frustration. But she’s not the one who should be frustrated. That’s *my* job.

The truth is, the Queen of Hearts has stolen Neverland’s amulet. I don’t know how she got her claws on it, but thanks to her and her royal greed, Neverland is falling apart. The kids are ageing, the magic is dying, and the children in Hollow Land aren’t dreaming like they should. And those dreams? They’re what fuels us.

I sent Smee after it. *Him*, not me. He should’ve been back by now. But he isn’t. I start pacing again.

“You know, I’m doing my best,” Wendy mutters.

“Your best?” I scoff. “This is your *best*? We’re standing here watching you faff around with glitter.” I let out a sigh, my patience fraying. “Time’s slipping away, Wendy. Don’t you get that? Don’t you even look in the mirror? I mean, just look at you—seems puberty finally kicked in.” I cock an eyebrow at her. Wendy, who always looked around fourteen, now... well, let’s just say she’s developed some fine assets.

She glares at me, hands planted on her hips. “Maybe if you stopped breathing down my neck—”

“Oh, don’t flatter yourself, love. If I wanted to breathe down someone’s neck, I’d make sure they knew it.” I flash her a grin, but it’s thin, more irritation than charm.

Wendy turns away, flicking the dust into the air. It shimmers, hanging there for a moment, like it’s actually going to work this time. And then—nothing. Just the same useless glitter floating in the air.

I laugh, a short, bitter sound. “Oh, well done, love. Brilliant effort. We’ll have the Queen quaking in her boots in no time.”

“Shut up, Hook,” she snaps, throwing the empty pouch onto the table. “I’m *trying*.”

I lean back against the wall, folding my arms. “If we don’t get that amulet back, we’re all screwed, including you. So try harder, because it’s been a month, and look at this mess. Look at you, look at this place. *Look at my hair*—there’s grey in it.”

Just as I finish, the door slams open. Perfect. Just what we need—the last person I want to see right now. Tinkerbell.

Wings glittering, she zips into the room, looking far too smug for my liking. Her landing, though, isn't as graceful as usual, and she nearly stumbles when she comes to a stop. But, of course, she says nothing, and I bite back the sarcastic comment on the tip of my tongue.

"Still messing with the dust?" she says, sauntering over to Wendy. "No wonder nothing's working—you're doing it wrong."

"Oh, fantastic," I say, rolling my eyes as I push off the wall. "Here comes the expert."

Tinkerbell spins around and glares at me. "Like you've got better ideas, Captain Vanity." "Actually, yes, my idea was that you'd show up sooner," I say, crossing my arms and leaning back casually. "Smee's missing, time's running out, and we can't even get through the bloody portal to save him or the amulet. So unless you've come here to fix this mess, why don't you flap those glittery wings of yours and buzz off?"

"I wasn't the one dragging my feet, refusing to use pixie dust, was I?" Tinkerbell shoots back, hovering in the air like she owns the place.

Wendy crosses her arms, throwing a look at Tink. "You know, if we stopped arguing for five minutes, we might actually get something done."

Tinkerbell smirks, that all-too-smug look plastered on her face. "Exactly." She zips up, snatches the pouch of pixie dust off the table, and flicks it open with a dramatic flair. "Step aside, amateurs. Watch how it's really done."

She grabs a pinch of dust and flings it into the air, her wings glowing brighter for a moment. For a second, I almost think she might botch it—almost.

The dust hangs in the air, sparkling, and then there's a faint crackling sound, like something's finally waking up. The air shifts. A shimmer appears—faint at first, but slowly building into a swirling, shimmering portal right in the middle of the room.

"The portal to Wonderland," I mutter, shaking my head. "Finally. About time someone around here knew what they were doing."

Tinkerbell crosses her arms, a smirk curling on her lips. "Next time, maybe trust the pixie."

"Trust you?" I scoff, raising an eyebrow. "I wouldn't go that far, love. But I'll admit, you saved the day—this time. Now, it's my turn."

The portal flickers as the magic stabilises, and Wendy looks up at me. "Now what?"

I grin, stepping towards the swirling gateway. “Now, darling, we get the amulet back, and I save the bloody day.”

Tinkerbell crosses her arms again, her smirk unwavering. “If you mess this up, I’m not saving your arse again.”

“Oh, Tink,” I say with a wink, stepping through the portal, “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

And with that, I’m gone—into Wonderland, with nothing but the fading shimmer of the portal behind me.

Chapter Three

ALICE

THERE'S a funny thing about coming home—no matter how long I've been away, the moment I step through the gate, it feels like no time has passed at all. Mum's house, with its towering columns and spotless windows, looks just as cold and imposing as I remember. The garden is perfectly trimmed, the flowers arranged in neat little rows, not a petal out of place. Of course, heaven forbid Mum allow a little bit of chaos into her pristine world.

Still, some part of me smiles, because this is home. I know I haven't been here in a while, and I know when I hit eighteen, I couldn't wait to leave, but there are memories here. My memories. There's something oddly comforting in the familiarity. The crisp smell of lavender from the garden, the quiet hum of the city beyond the gates. It's like a tiny pocket of time, frozen just for me. Or maybe frozen against me. Knowing Mum, probably the latter.

I heave my bag along the drive and reach the door. I give it a knock, though I know there's no point. Mum always knows when I'm coming. She has this uncanny ability to track my every move. Sure enough, the door swings open before I've even dropped my hand.

"Well, look who finally decided to grace us with her presence," Mum's voice greets me like a cold wind—cool, sharp, and very much unimpressed.

I paste on my best *good daughter* smile, even as my stomach does a somersault that would score epic points at the Olympics. “Good afternoon, Mother. It’s nice to see you.”

“You’re late. You’re always late.”

The sting of her words slaps against me, and I flinch, trying to brush it off. I won’t let it get to me. Not this time. “I’m not late, actually. I arrived exactly when I said I would.”

She gives me that look—the one that says I’m already wrong, no matter what the facts are. “Well, I suppose you’d better come in. We’ve been waiting long enough.”

I step inside, and the scent of polish fills my lungs. The house, like the garden, is perfectly clean and neat. Every piece of furniture in its proper place, not a speck of dust anywhere. It’s like walking into a magazine spread.

“Grace is already here,” my mother says, shutting the door with a snap. “She’s been such a tremendous help. I don’t know what I’d do without her.”

I bite my tongue, keeping my smile in place. “That’s great. I’m glad you have her.”

Grace is my sister. She’s always right, and I’m always wrong.

Mum sniffs, clearly unsatisfied with my response. “At least someone knows how to step up and be responsible in this family.”

There’s the familiar pang in my chest at her words, but I shove it aside. Today’s not the day for an argument. I’ve spent too many years trying to win her approval, and I know by now it’s a lost cause. Still, the sunshine in me refuses to be dimmed. “Well, I’ll do what I can to help now that I’m here. Better late than never, right?”

She eyes me for a moment, like she’s deciding whether I’m worth the trouble. “Hmm. We’ll see. Your sister’s in the lounge, but I’ll show you to your room first.”

I nod, following her up the winding staircase. As we climb, I can’t help but think about the last time I was here—how different things were then. My room was still my little haven, full of fairy lights, old books, and the magic Gran had always encouraged. I know before I even get there, it isn’t going to be the same now. I’m sure Mum would have stripped all that away before I even got on the bus out of here.

She stops in front of my old bedroom door and turns the knob with a flourish, as if she's revealing some grand masterpiece. "Here we are." She claps her hands together and steps inside. "I finally got it redecorated."

She inhales deeply, clearly proud of her work, and all I can do is clench my jaw and stare at the monstrosity of a room that doesn't even remotely resemble the place I left behind.

I step into the room, and my heart sinks. I've stepped into a stranger's room. Everything is gone—the fairy lights, the shelves of fantasy books, the soft blankets and colourful pillows. The walls, once a soft, calming pastel, are now stark white. The furniture is sleek, modern, and completely devoid of any personality.

"It's... different," I say, forcing the words out.

My mother beams, clearly pleased with herself. "Exactly. It's clean, it's mature. No more of that childish nonsense you used to keep in here."

Childish nonsense. Right. I swallow the lump in my throat, forcing my smile to stay in place. "You've really made it your own."

"Much better, don't you think?" She looks at me, as if she's expecting applause.

"Yeah," I say, trying to keep the disappointment out of my voice. "It's very... grown-up."

She nods, satisfied, and turns to leave. "I'll expect you downstairs shortly. Aunt Petunia will be here soon, and so will Uncle Harold. I'd like us to sit down and have some tea, discuss how things are going to go tomorrow. We've got the will reading on Monday."

I nod, watching her leave before I allow myself to let out a breath. I shouldn't have been surprised. I moved out. It's her house, so this is her room now. But she got rid of every part of me. Gran helped me make this room my own. I miss it... I miss her. The warmth, the magic she brought into my life. Everything feels a little colder without her.

I set my suitcase down by the bed, and that's when I see it. Sitting on the perfectly made bed, right in the middle of the stark white duvet, is a single playing card. The Queen of Hearts, with a small red rose lying next to it.

My heart skips a beat. I pick up the card, turning it over in my hands, but it's just a card. A regular playing card. Still, something about it feels... strange. It doesn't belong here. Not in this perfectly organised room.

I turn and call out, "Mum? What's this?"

She appears at the doorway, frowning at the card. “What do you mean? I haven’t put anything there.”

“It was just lying here, on the bed.”

She waves it off, clearly unimpressed. “I’ve no idea where that came from. It’s just a playing card, Alice. You’re not going to start with your wild fantasies again, are you?”

I suppress the urge to roll my eyes. “No, Mum. It’s just... odd, that’s all.”

She sighs, her patience clearly wearing thin. “Well, whatever it is, it’s not important. Now come downstairs.” If I didn’t know her better, I’d miss the slight flush in her cheeks, the telltale twitch in her hand. “I told you as a child, we won’t speak of that nonsense ever again.”

She disappears again, leaving me alone with the card. I look at it one more time, a strange sense of unease creeping into my chest. The Queen of Hearts. The red rose. It’s too... deliberate. Too perfect.

Gran always loved a good mystery. Maybe this is her way of sending one last bit of magic my way.

Chapter Four

HOOK

FALLING. Let me tell you, when you first start to fall from somewhere very high, the first thing that goes through your mind isn't your life flashing before your eyes, it isn't a sense of *what the hell*? No. For a brief second, there's a moment of wondering, a not-quite-figuring-out what the bloody hell is happening.

Then there's a moment of total and utter panic. And that's me. I'm flailing through the air as if I've been yanked off the side of my ship mid-storm. My heart's pounding, my breaths coming fast, and all I can think is, "Shit, shit, shit." as I desperately grapple for anything close to me, anything that might stop me from falling to my death.

The portal was supposed to bring me to Wonderland, not drop me into a bottomless pit.

"Bloody hell," I shout, twisting in the air, trying to grab onto something—anything, I don't care. It just has to stop the freefall. My fingers scrape against cold, damp stone, but nothing holds. It's just endless black, endless falling, and no ground in sight.

But something catches my eye—a table, a freaking table, floating to my left, drifting past me like it's the most natural thing in the world. "What in the—?"

Before I can even finish that thought, it's gone, swallowed up by the shadows. And then there's a clock, ticking away as it lazily floats by. Oh

sure, I think, because Wonderland couldn't let me just fall. No. It's gone and tossed in some random furniture for good measure.

Bravo.

I reach out instinctively, snatching at the ledge sticking out from the wall, but my hook scrapes uselessly against the rock. "Of course. Why would it do anything else?"

I twist around again, trying to find some sense of up and down, because believe me, at this point, I have no fucking idea. The world is spinning. Lamps, mirrors, and teacups float by in a nonsensical parade, tumbling past me like I've fallen into some lunatic's storeroom. There's even a rocking chair—a ROCKING CHAIR—drifting serenely past me, like it's taking an afternoon nap.

"This can't be real," I mutter. It's the only explanation I have as I reach out for a branch that seems to materialise out of nowhere. I grab hold, hoping for a reprieve, but the sodding thing snaps in my hand and I'm back to falling. "Oh, bloody brilliant. Because why wouldn't I?"

I kick out in the air, trying to regain some balance, but it's like I'm suspended in a world that's given up on the laws of gravity. Objects drift lazily by, taunting me with their absurdity—a portrait of a cat, a spinning globe, a stack of books. Each one glides past as if this entire place is showing off its mad little collection of odds and sods.

The panic is still there, bubbling under the surface, but it's giving way to something else now. Annoyance, maybe. Because this isn't even falling. This is floating.

"Wait a second," I mutter, glancing down. I'm not hurtling through the air anymore. My descent slows. I'm still falling, yes, but it's more like drifting down a lazy river rather than plummeting to my death.

I know, dramatic. I don't care.

I grab another root—this one thicker and gnarled—and it holds. For a moment I dangle there, catching my breath. "Well, Wonderland, would you look at that. You've got yourself a sense of humour. Hook is hooked."

And just as I think I might be able to pull myself up, the root cracks and sends me spinning again.

Another bookcase drifts by, stacked with dusty old tomes. I'm half tempted to reach for one, just to see if it's real, but before I can, a chandelier—yes, a chandelier—floats past me, swinging gently.

“This place... this whole place is one big joke,” I spit out, torn between laughter and frustration. “Alright, Wonderland, you’ve had your fun. Now where’s the sodding ground?”

I’m still descending, slowly but surely, my body twisting and turning in the air as objects float in their own bizarre orbit. I try to right myself, but it’s no sodding use. There’s no sense of direction here—just an endless freefall through a world that’s decided it’s going to torture me and gravity is optional.

A grandfather clock floats by next, its pendulum swinging back and forth. I reach for it, thinking maybe I can grab onto something solid and float back up, but my fingers slip off the polished wood and I’m spinning again. Brilliant.

I catch a glimpse of a mirror—my own reflection, wild-eyed and frustrated, staring back at me as I careen down. “Oh, you’re just enjoying this too, aren’t you?” I roll my eyes at myself and the mirror spins out of view, leaving me with nothing but the occasional floating teacup for company.

And then, finally, the ground appears. Not rushing up to meet me, but slowly—like the earth itself is taking its sweet time. Still, I brace myself, arms outstretched, ready for the inevitable thud.

With a dull thump, I land and lose my balance, sprawling onto my back, the wind knocked out of me. I’m otherwise intact. I stare at the ceiling—if you can call it that. It’s a dark, endless cavern dimly lit by patches of glowing moss that cling to the walls. For a moment, I just lie there, catching my breath. “Well,” I say to the empty room, “that could have been worse.”

I sit up, rubbing my ribs as I take in the space around me. The cavern is wide, with jagged walls and damp stone. It smells of earth and something metallic. I’ve landed in the belly of some forgotten beast. There’s no clear exit—no doors, no windows. Just a vast empty space with nothing but shadows.

“Of course.” I drag myself to my feet. “Why would there be a door? Why would it be that easy?”

I dust myself off, grimacing at the dirt clinging to my leather coat. “I wonder if Smee is stuck in some place like this? He better be. Sending me down here after his sorry arse.”

I start pacing, my boots echoing off the stone floor. The silence is unnerving. Even the objects that had drifted past me seem to have vanished. It's just me, the empty space, and the oppressive quiet.

"Alright, Wonderland," I say, glancing around. "What's your next trick? You've thrown me down a hole, floated a damn chandelier past my head, and now what? Just leave me here?"

It's then that I turn, and behind me is a table. It wasn't there before, let me tell you. On top of it is a small bottle. It has a small tag hanging from it. I lift it, turn it over.

"Drink me."

I let out a breath, shaking my head. "Oh, hell no. I know how this part goes." So I open it, bring the bottle to my nose, take a whiff of it. It smells like peppermint. And I tip the contents into my mouth. Because why not? What's the worst that could happen in this mad world?

Chapter Five

ALICE

SITTING in my mother's perfectly arranged lounge feels a lot like sitting in a museum, except this one is decorated with judgement, and none of it too good in my favour. Everything is pristine, cold, and utterly untouchable. It's almost like I'm a guest in my own family home—except, I realise with a wry smile, I am.

My mother and Grace are sitting on the sofa like they're posing for a family portrait. Grace, only eighteen months older than me, sits perfectly. Her long slender legs stick out of a perfectly pressed skirt, ankles crossed like she's royalty. My mother sits beside her, the proud parent. Next to me is the seat my father would have taken when we were children. Where he'd have sat, and patted my leg, and told me, "No, my sweetness, your mother doesn't hate you." I long for him almost as much as I long for my grandmother.

"Is Dad coming?" I ask, trying to add a bit of cheerfulness to my voice.

I can see my mother's eyes almost set on fire at my question, and Grace stiffens. The temperature in the room seems to drop a few degrees. Mum's lips purse like she's just bitten into a particularly sour lemon.

Grace, ever the perfect daughter, jumps in before Mum can unleash whatever caustic comment is brewing behind those narrowed eyes. "You mean he hasn't told you himself? I thought you and he were joined at the hip."

I swallow the urge to snap back and smile. "Well, you know Dad. Always full of surprises. Keeps life interesting, doesn't he?"

When I don't elaborate, Grace says, "Dad is arriving tomorrow, before the service." Somehow, she makes something so innocent sound like it's poison on her lips. I half expect her to spit after saying 'Dad', like she's trying to get rid of a bad taste.

My heart flutters at the thought that my dad will be here. A little spark of joy in this sad affair. He loved Gran. She got him, just the way she got me—the dreamers, the ones with their heads in the clouds and their feet rarely on the ground. I'm not even sure how my mother ended up being the one related to her. They're total opposites.

"I'm glad Dad's coming," I say, more to myself than anyone else. "Gran would have wanted him here. Remember how they used to dance in the kitchen?" Just thinking about it makes my heart soar.

The look Mum gives me could curdle milk. "Yes, well," she says, her voice clipped, "let's just hope he manages to be on time for once in his life. So," my mother says. "You've finished your eulogy, I assume?"

I nod, my stomach twisting at the topic change. "Yes, it's ready." Chock-full of warmth and love, just like Gran.

"Good. Make sure it is straightforward. No need for any of your emotional weight bringing the family's mood down. This is a simple affair. We're simply saying goodbye to your grandmother."

I nod again, with a forced smile, trying to keep it light, even though my insides are doing the cha-cha. "Right."

Grace glances at me, her smile sweet but laced with something else. "Where is Christopher? I thought he'd be here with you... but then again, he's—"

"He couldn't get the time off work," I say, my heart sinking. I paste on another smile. "Work has been crazy. He has some deadlines."

"How many deadlines can there be working in a debt collection call centre?" She scoffs.

"It's a shame you don't get yourself a nice educated man, like Ted," my mother adds.

I can't help but roll my eyes. "And where is Ted? He's not here either." I raise an eyebrow at Grace. "Where is the perfect husband today?"

Grace's expression doesn't falter. If anything, she looks more pleased with herself. "Ted is in town, actually. He's picking up a few things for the

wake. He's been such a help with all the arrangements. Mother couldn't have managed without him."

My mother nods in agreement, her smile softening when she talks about Ted. The wonderchild's golden husband. "Yes. He's been absolutely wonderful. Always so dependable."

I grit my teeth, keeping my smile in place. Of course, Ted's being helpful. Of course he's doing everything right. But I bet he's out there hiding. How long does it take to buy things for a wake? I don't blame him. I'd be doing the same.

"That's great," is what I actually say, trying to sound sincere. "Glad he's such a big help."

Mum gives me that look—the one that says she's unimpressed, no matter what I say. "Yes, well, you know. It's important to have someone you can rely on. This is why I depend on Grace so much. Truly, I'd be in such a muddle if it wasn't for her and Ted. She's such a wonderful daughter."

Unlike me, she means. The sting of her words hits hard, but I shove it down like I always do. No point in fighting with her now. Not today. I nod, keeping my voice steady. "Well, I'll do what I can now that I'm here."

Mum doesn't respond, her attention already shifting back to Grace, as if I've already faded into the background. I glance out of the window, desperate for a distraction from this conversation, when something catches my eye. A flash of white.

My heart skips a beat, and I sit up straighter, squinting at the garden. There—just by the hedge—a little figure, hurrying away. No. It can't be.

"The white rabbit," I whisper. Without thinking, I scramble to my feet, nearly knocking over my cup of tea. "Did you see that?"

Both Mum and Grace stare at me like I've just sprouted a second head.

"What are you talking about?" Mum's voice is sharp, tinged with that familiar irritation.

"I—I thought I saw a rabbit." I say it without thinking, the words tumbling out before I can stop them.

Grace snorts. "Oh, Alice. Not this again." She rolls her eyes dramatically. "Do we really have to do all this again? It was bad enough the last time. You're not ten anymore."

Mum sighs, placing her cup down with deliberate slowness. "Honestly, Alice. You're an adult now. You need to stop chasing after these ridiculous

fantasies. It's embarrassing."

I blink, still staring out of the window, but the figure is gone. "It's nothing," I mumble, feeling a flush of heat creep up my neck. "Just... thought I saw something."

Grace leans back, her arms crossed. "This is why Dad left, you know."

I freeze. My stomach twists painfully, the lump in my throat making it hard to breathe. "That's not—"

"It is," Mum cuts me off, her eyes narrowing. "He was always indulging you, letting you run wild with your imagination while I was left trying to keep things in order. You never understood reality, Alice. And your father encouraged that."

I bite my lip, the familiar ache in my chest making it hard to stand there and take it. "Dad was just making me feel accepted, that's all," I whisper, though the words sound hollow even to me.

Mum shakes her head, dismissing my protest as if it's nothing. "Yes, well, I certainly didn't encourage your nonsense. It was the constant topic of our arguments."

Grace adds with a smirk, "Maybe one day you'll grow up and stop believing in fairy tales."

I feel the sting of their words, but I'm not going to give them the satisfaction of seeing me break. I glance towards the window again, desperate for a way out of this conversation. "I'm going outside. I just need a moment."

"Alice," Mum snaps, standing up. "Where are you going? We're not finished here."

"I'll be back," I say quickly, already halfway to the door. "I just need some air."

I step out into the garden, the cool air hitting my face as I make my way towards the spot where I thought I saw the rabbit. My heart is still racing, but some of that is from my mother and sister's cruel words. I'm not even sure now if they realise what they say hurts, or if they're simply too blinded by their own need to be right.

My mother has always blamed our father leaving on me. And yes, he did indulge my dreams and fantasies, but not in a bad way. I was the one with the wild imagination, my mother used to say, the one who'd make up a whole world I apparently fell into. Funny really, I've hardly thought about Wonderland since I left here, and now it seems to be echoing all

around me. I know it was all a dream, but I loved so much to tell the story about it, to my dad, to Gran.

I step around the hedge to where I saw the 'rabbit', but it isn't a rabbit. It's just the garden swing. The white cover draped over it has come loose, flapping in the breeze.

I pull the cover back into place, securing it as the swing creaks softly beneath my touch. For a moment, I just stand here, staring at the garden.

The door behind me opens and my mother steps out. "What are you doing out here?"

I don't turn around. "Just getting some air," I say, louder this time, my voice tinged with a bit more bite. "I'll be back in a minute."

Mum doesn't even bother hiding the sigh behind me. "Well, don't dawdle. We still have arrangements to discuss."

"Right," I mutter, still facing the garden. "Wouldn't want to delay those."

The door clicks shut, and the tension in my shoulders eases immediately. I let out a breath I didn't even realise I was holding. The garden stretches out in front of me, perfect, pristine, just like everything else in this house. So neat, so predictable. So not me.

I start to turn back, ready to face round two of their backhanded comments when something catches my eye—a flash of red, tucked near the rose bushes. I blink, half thinking my mind's playing tricks on me. But it's still there.

I take a step closer, heart skipping just a little. There, nestled in the grass, is a playing card. I bend down, my fingers brushing the cool surface as I pick it up.

The Queen of Hearts.

Chapter Six

HOOK

THE LIQUID SLIPS down my throat, cool as silk, peppermint and a hint of something else—a taste I can't quite put my finger on. But there's no time to think about it, because a moment later, everything changes.

The ground tilts, or maybe it's me. At this point, who can tell? Wonderland's already playing tricks on me, and I'm not even properly in it yet. I'm ready to curse this place and all its theatrics. My lips curl into a sneer—a sneer that'd make lesser men reconsider their life choices—if Wonderland were a man, that is.

I'm shrinking. My coat billows around me like a deflating sail caught in a rogue wind. I try to grab something—anything—but there's nothing to hold on to. The cavern walls stretch upwards, expanding into impossible heights like some fever dream.

“Holy, goddamn hell” I shout, the words ripping out of my throat before I have the chance to swallow them back. The entire cavern keeps growing around me, and that damned bottle—it slips from my hand and lands with a pathetic thunk. I'd say it lies at my feet, but right now, I'm pretty sure I'm the one lying at its feet.

It's bigger than me now. Big enough that if I had the mind, I could crawl right inside it. But apparently, Wonderland hasn't had its fill of me yet, because before I can take a proper breath, the ground beneath my boots starts rippling—like someone's tossed a stone across a glassy pond. And it's not just a ripple either—it's waves now, rising and rolling beneath

me. I stagger back, trying to keep my footing, my boots slipping on the wet moss-covered surface. Before I can go arse over tit, I throw my arms out to the side, trying desperately to stay upright.

A giggle echoes through the cavern, high-pitched and eerie. The sound bounces off the walls. I spin around, hook raised, ready to cut down whoever's laughing at me. But there's no one there—just shadows and echoes. The giggling gets louder, shriller, like a swarm of mocking voices taking up residence in my head, gnawing at my last nerve—which, by the way, is already frayed enough.

“All right, that's enough,” I snap, glaring into the dark. “I get it—you're all-powerful and in control.”

The laughter cuts off abruptly, like someone's flipped a switch. Silence descends, and I'm not sure which is worse. I'm left standing there, listening to the pounding of my own heartbeat echoing in my ears. It's too loud, but I take a moment to catch my breath, my eyes darting around the cavern.

And then Wonderland decides it's not quite done with me.

This time, the ground splits beneath my feet, the water draining away through the cracks. I leap back—whatever's below, I want no part of it, thank you very much. But before I can do anything else, something shoots out of the crack. It rises fast, a monstrous flower with dark roots curling around it and thorns bristling like an angry beast.

The petals unfurl slowly, revealing a face—yes, a bloody face. Big blinking eyes and a mouth that stretches into a too-wide grin. “Well, well,” the flower says, because of course it talks. Why wouldn't it? Its voice is high-pitched and sing-song, and I know right away that it's the owner of that awful giggling. “What have we here?” It leans in closer, and I put my hand to my nose as the scent of pollen hits me—sickly sweet, mixed with rot. I see it too—pollen falling away from its petals like ash. “A pirate. All alone in Wonderland,” it pauses after every word, like it's savouring them.

“What in the ever-loving—”

Before I can finish, another root shoots up and smacks me right across the mouth, effectively shutting me up.

“No, no. Not the place for such language...” it sing-songs, the grin never faltering.

I yank the root away with my hook, giving the flower a glare that has made hardened men beg for mercy. “Touch me again, and I'll rip every

single root out.”

The flower giggles again—a sound that could easily drive a man to madness. “Oh, so feisty.” It blinks those oversized eyes at me. “But what does a lost pirate seek, hmm? Is it gold? Revenge? Or something beyond the end?”

I let out an exasperated sigh, flicking stray pollen off my coat. “I’m looking for my first mate. Have you seen him? Slack-jawed, bumbling excuse of a man, about yay high, scruffy beard, looks like he’d lose a fight with his own reflection.”

The flower blinks—one eye, then the other—before it bursts into laughter again. I’m glad it finds this so amusing. “A man who fears his own shadow, scurrying like a mouse—yes, I’ve seen him.” It tilts its head, considering. “He was headed to the palace where hearts are red, where roses bloom but might leave you dead.”

I frown, irritation bubbling beneath my skin. “The Queen’s palace?” I take a step closer, narrowing my eyes at the flower. “And how, pray tell, do I get to the palace?”

The flower’s grin widens, eyes glinting with mischief that makes my skin itch. “The way to the palace is twisted and strange; follow the path where the trees rearrange. Step after step, with patience to spend, only those who persist will reach journey’s end.”

“A riddle, is it?” I take another step toward it, and oh, how I wish I had my sword right now. I raise my hook. “Care to make it a bit clearer, love? Not in the mood for rhymes today.”

The flower shakes with laughter, petals trembling as if they can’t contain their glee. “Clearer, you say? Oh, but Wonderland loves the unclear. Left or right. Wander or fall—find the path where the shadows crawl. Cross the brook where dreams are lost, but beware the bridge; to pass, there is a cost.”

I let out another sigh, rubbing my forehead with my good hand. “You’re really just here to be an irritation, aren’t you?” I lift my hook. “What if I were to cut you down? Would you tell me then?”

The flower doesn’t flinch. Instead, it leans closer still, eyes bright with glee. “But Wonderland will grow back, Captain. It always grows back.”

I shoot it a glare, grinding my teeth. My jaw aches from the tension. “Fine. Forget the palace. How about a more straightforward question—how do I get out of this god-awful cavern?”

The flower angles its head to look at me, eyes twinkling like I'm the daft one here. "Out of the cavern?" It sways from side to side, petals brushing together as if applauding itself. "Oh, that's easy. Use the door, silly."

I blink. "What door?"

The petals tremble again, like it's trying to stifle a giggle. "Why, that door." It nods behind me, and I turn, ready to tear into the flower with a few choice words, but then I see it.

There, embedded in the stone wall, is a door. Small, with a brass knob, entirely out of place in this wretched cavern. It looks like it belongs to an old cottage, sitting smugly in the middle of this chaos.

"Well, I'll be damned..." I mutter, arching an eyebrow. "That was not there before." I ignore the flower's incessant giggling as I stride over to the door, giving it a once-over. It doesn't look particularly trustworthy, but then again, what in Wonderland does?

With a final sneer at the flower, I reach for the handle and push it open.

Chapter Seven

ALICE

WHY, oh why can't I sleep? The one night I actually need it, and my stupid brain decides not to cooperate. I'm lying here, staring at the ceiling, my mind racing in circles. I should be focused on Gran, on the grief I should be feeling, and I am, honestly. It's there, lodged deep in my heart, that ache of missing her. But, in truth, I grieved for her a long time ago. The Gran in the care home wasn't the same woman who lit up every room with her mischief, the one who'd sit on the rooftop with me watching the sunset, always telling me to keep looking for magic.

She used to tell me that if you looked in just the right place, at sunrise or sunset, I'd see a spark—a flash of something magical, waking up or going to sleep. She'd say, "You've got to grab for it, Alice." And I'd always believe her, even if I never actually saw it. She said that magic came when the worlds were open, and we could cross over.

Of course, I told her about Wonderland. She was the only one, well and Dad, who'd ever really listened to me. Mum got so sick of hearing it she threatened to send me to a therapist. By the time I was leaving home, I was convinced I needed one, too.

But that's where my head is—lying here in this bed, this same room. Even though all my stuff's been stripped away, and nothing here is the same, my thoughts haven't changed much. Maybe I am childish. Maybe I do still live with the fairies. But I feel it inside me, light and fluttery, and almost like I could touch it if I just put my hand over my heart and wished

hard enough. Maybe, in another world filled with magic, Gran's still there. She's young, free, not in pain, not confused. Not being spoon-fed slop by some overworked, underpaid carer.

I sigh, rolling onto my side and grabbing my phone off the bedside table. I scroll through my contacts, hovering over Christopher's name. It's only just past eleven. He'll be awake; he always is.

I press call, hoping maybe hearing his voice will sooth me. I feel restless, uneasy and a whole bunch of other things.

It takes a few rings before he picks up. "Hi," I say, my voice soft.

"I thought you'd be busy," he replies, no hello, no how are you.

"No. I'm just in bed. Couldn't sleep. What are you up to?"

He yawns down the line at me. "Not much."

"Okay."

There's silence. The kind that stretches on and on, painfully long. I'm not sure what to say, so I wait for him to fill it. The seconds tick by, and the quiet between us grows, heavy and awkward. I clear my throat, hoping he'll pick up on it, but he doesn't. I hear rustling on his end—maybe a sigh, maybe just him adjusting. Still nothing. I almost say his name, just to prompt him, but it sticks in my throat.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, he speaks. "I'll let you get to sleep."

I don't want to go. "No. I can't sleep. That's why I called."

"Is that Alice? Hey, Alice," a voice booms down the line, filled with laughter and cheers.

"Yo, Alice ..." Another voice.

"Are you with Scotty and Beth?" I ask. They're our friends—well, more my friends than his.

"We just went out for something to eat."

"Alliceeeee..." Another voice shouts, followed by giggles and someone yelling at Christopher to hurry up. Beth shouts, "Love you," down the phone.

"Dougie's there?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Yeah, we ... Dougie wasn't feeling great. Lost his job. We thought we'd go and cheer him up a bit, you know? Be good mates."

That makes me sit up. "Right, be good mates ..." But that's not really what my mind's caught on. It's not Dougie, not really. My heart hurts in a

different way, but I bite back what I want to say. Instead, I ask, “What happened with his job?”

“Not much. End of the season, you know. He’s just a bit down about it.”

“He’s down about losing a job he knew was ending?”

“Yeah. You know Dougie.” Dougie is Christopher’s friend.

“I thought you were busy. You said you had a deadline when Gran died ...”

“I got an extension. Listen, I’ve got to go, alright? You sleep well.”

“Wait, Chris ...” But the phone goes dead, leaving me in the dark, staring at my screen. And now, instead of all the sadness that was already tangled up inside me ... He got an extension ... I’m sure there’s a reason, but it doesn’t stop the hurt. He could’ve come with me.

“I’m sorry, babe. I’d be there if I could,” he’d told me.

Gah. I’m not going to think about it. Nope. I take a deep breath and toss my phone onto the other side of the bed. For a moment, I just sit there, knees drawn up to my chest, chin resting on top, staring out of the window. I haven’t closed the curtains. I never do, not since Gran told me about the magic. Maybe, just maybe, leaving them open would let it in. I know I’m an adult now, but closing them feels wrong.

“I’m not going to sleep. That’s for sure,” I mutter.

With a sigh, I get out of bed, pulling my hoodie over my pyjama top and slipping on my trainers—since I don’t own slippers, and Mum would lose her mind if I walked barefoot through her house. It’d be a cardinal sin or something.

The house is dark, silent, and every creak of the stairs feels like I’m announcing my presence to the world. The kitchen’s dimly lit by a single light over the stove, and I move towards it, the thought of a warm drink maybe bringing me some comfort.

I reach for the kettle, my fingers brushing its cool surface, but something makes me pause. Leaning against the coffee jar is a small white card. I don’t even have to pick it up and turn it over to know what it is. The same as the one in my room, the one outside—the Queen of Hearts.

But, of course, I do pick it up, staring at it. “What the hell...?”

I glance around me, half-expecting Ted to pop out from somewhere, smirking, saying this was all some elaborate prank. Is someone messing with me?

I go back to staring at the card, like it might give me some answers. How did it get here? I turn it over. There's nothing. Just the card—smooth, glossy, and weirdly out of place.

I'm still standing there, lost in thought, when the back door creaks open, making me jump half out of my skin. I whirl around, heart pounding, only to see Ted sneaking back inside, closing the door as quietly as he can.

"Bloody hell, Ted," I hiss, clutching my chest. "You nearly gave me a heart attack."

He gives me a sheepish shrug. "Sorry. I went out to get some air."

"Fresh air, or a cigarette?" I raise an eyebrow, pointing to the lighter clutched in his hand. Even from here, I can smell it. "I don't know how my sister still thinks you've quit. She'll kill you if she finds out, you know that?"

"That's why I sneak out when she's asleep. You can't sleep?"

"No. I was just making coffee. You want one?"

"Nah, that's an instant insomnia trip."

"Suit yourself." I turn back to the kettle, setting it to boil.

He steps closer, nodding towards the card still in my hand. "What's that?"

I look down at it, then back up at him. "A playing card. The Queen of Hearts. I found it by the kettle. Did you put it here?"

"Not me. Are you having some kind of breakdown again?"

"Again?"

Before Ted can say anything else, the sound of footsteps comes from the hallway. Grace appears, her arms crossed and her face set in that 'I'm-too-good-for-this' expression she wears so well. She stops at the doorway, her eyes flicking between Ted and me, her gaze sharp and probing.

"Ted," she says. "Have you been smoking again?"

There's a beat of silence. Ted shifts his weight, looking at the floor, and I can feel the tension building in the room.

The last thing I need is being in the middle of their squabbling, so I take a breath and force a smile. "It was me." The words tumble out before I can think twice. "I was the one smoking."

Grace narrows her eyes, her brows arching in surprise. "You? I didn't know you smoked."

I shrug, trying to look casual, even though my heart's pounding. "There's a lot you don't know about me."

Grace lets out an exasperated sigh, and her expression shifts from surprise to disdain. "If you're going to start a fight, I'm going back to bed." She shoots Ted a look, her lips pursed. "Come on, Ted."

Ted hesitates, glancing at me. I give him a quick smile, one that I hope says, 'It's fine, just go.' He nods, following Grace out of the kitchen without another word.

I stand there for a moment, the silence of the kitchen nice for a change. My eyes drift to the patio doors, and that's when I catch it—a flash of white, just by the hedge.

My heart skips a beat. There, for just a second, I swear I see it again—a white rabbit, and then it's gone.

No. No freaking way.

Chapter Eight

HOOK

STEPPING through that bloody ridiculous door, I half expect to be assaulted by a kaleidoscope of colours, trees twisted into impossible shapes, and some other kind of wonderfully deranged extravagance this place is rumoured to have on display. But what I step into? It's about as magical as a bilge rat's arse.

The landscape sprawling ahead of me is as grey and lifeless as a corpse washed up on shore. Everything's cracked and tattered, looking as though it's been through hell and back. I set my boot on a path that seems more shattered than whole, as if Wonderland got bored of its own fantastical bullshit and decided to let itself go.

The once vibrant foliage now hangs limp and defeated, as if it's lost the will to live. I yank on a nearby branch, and the damn thing snaps off in my hand with barely a whisper of resistance. It's brittle, with hardly any leaves, and the few that do cling to life are as faded as a tart's lipstick after a long night. Their colour reminds me more of a bad hangover than any flower I've ever seen.

"Well, this is bloody disappointing," I grumble, stepping onto a path that's more dust than anything else. A muted cloud kicks up around my boots, a lacklustre welcome to whatever sorry state this place is in. "Where's my welcome fanfare? The cheers? Don't they know Captain Hook has graced them with his presence?"

A half-leaning, partially broken signpost sits up ahead, looking about as useful as a chocolate teapot. I squint at the carved lettering, trying to make out what it says, which is a feat in itself given how weathered it is.

"The Palace," one arrow reads, and underneath it, some helpful sod has scrawled, "Certain death." I can't help but smirk. My kind of place. Another arrow proclaims "Tea Party," and "The Jump Inn." Three paths, all spiraling off into different directions, each one looking as questionable as the next. But of course, none of the arrows actually point to any of the paths. "Well, aren't you just a fountain of clarity," I sneer at the sign.

I'm about to unleash a particularly clever quip about Wonderland's lack of originality when I raise my hand and... wait. Hand?

It's meant to be a hook. It was a hook, and that makes me stop dead in my tracks. I lift my other hand, just to make sure I haven't gone completely mad and mixed up my left from my right. But no. I have two hands. TWO. I flex my fingers, turn my hand over, my heart pounding a war drum in my chest. "What in the seven hells?"

I stare at it, my breath catching in my throat. The hook—the one that's been with me for years, as much a part of me as my own black heart—it's gone. In its place is a hand. My hand. Whole, flesh and bone, moving without hesitation. I stretch my fingers out, flexing them, watching in disbelief as they respond, knuckles cracking.

"Well, I'll be damned," I mutter, half expecting it to vanish again. Another of Wonderland's cruel tricks. But no, it's still there, as real as the nose on my face. I put it behind my back, then whip it out in front of me quickly, as if I can surprise myself and it'll be a hook again. But no, still a bloody hand.

It's been so long, I've almost forgotten what it's like to have a hand there. The weight of it, the sensation of air on my skin—it's foreign and familiar all at once.

I heave in a breath, trying to refocus. This is Wonderland—nothing's normal here, and I'll be damned if I let a little thing like regaining a limb throw me off my game.

I mumble the flower's riddle to myself, hoping against hope it might actually give me some kind of answer. "The way to the palace is twisted and strange; follow the path where the trees rearrange... Step after step..."

I shake my head, growling, "Bloody nonsense. About as useful as a fork in a sugar bowl."

I grab my compass out of my pocket instead, the metal cool against my newly restored fingers. The needle spins lazily, not settling on anything for a second. I tap the face, scowling. "Come on, you useless trinket. Which way? Don't tell me you've gone as mad as everything else in this godforsaken place."

It points left, then jerks right, as if it's as confused as I am. "Fantastic," I mutter. "Even the compass is drunk." I shove it back into my pocket with a disgusted grunt, letting out a sigh. Fine. If Wonderland won't give me a straight answer, I'll play it my way.

"Eenie, meenie, miney, mo..." I point to each path in turn, the words slow and deliberate, dripping with sarcasm. "Catch a mutinous bastard by his toe..."

My finger lands on the third path, apparently my lucky choice. It better be. If this is what the Queen did to Wonderland – and I have no doubt that this sorry shell of a place is her doing – I will not let this happen to Neverland. Not over my dead body, which, given the state of things, might be a very real possibility.

I glance down the dirt track, winding off into the distance until it disappears into the murk. I'd call it inviting, but I'm not in the business of lying to myself... others, yes, but me? Not bloody likely.

"Wonderland," I drawl, my voice a mixture of challenge and resignation, "don't let me down."

Chapter Nine

ALICE

THERE IS ABSOLUTELY no way these cards are just a coincidence. Not a chance. I don't know what they mean, but I'm not about to convince myself it's just my tired, grieving brain making things up. Three of them showing up today? Not likely. I could ask Mum if she had more of these cards, but I already know what she'd say—probably something along the lines of “Stop making up stories, Alice.”

I let out a shaky breath, pulling my hoodie tighter around me. Fine. If someone wants to play games, let's see where this leads. What would Gran say? She'd tell me to follow the magic, to see where curiosity could take me. I lay the cards out on the counter, staring at them. All of them look identical. I grab my glasses out of my pocket, slipping them on to take a closer look.

They look like regular playing cards. Each one is the Queen of Hearts. I hold one closer, studying it, and the more I look, the more it feels like she's staring back at me, daring me to figure this out.

“What do you want?” I mutter, turning the card over. Something catches my eye—a glimmer in the light. I squint, angling it, and there it is: a faint shimmer beneath the surface. My heart pounds as I pick at the edge, peeling back the coating bit by bit. Underneath, there are words—tiny, almost impossible to read.

I lean in close, squinting until the words come into focus.

“To the girl who left, yet can't escape,

The Queen demands your presence, make no mistake.

Where roses are red, and thorns are keen,

A Halloween Ball awaits, hosted by the Queen.

Come willingly, or risk her wrath,

Follow the cards, or suffer her path.

You have until midnight to heed the call,

Or Wonderland shall consume you once and for all.”

I pick up another card, peel back its coating, and find another message.

A different riddle:

“Red roses bloom, and shadows grow tall,

The Queen calls for Alice to come to her hall.

Ignore this invite, face peril untold,

Wonderland waits with a darkness that’s cold.”

And the third one:

“The clock is ticking, the hour grows near,

The Queen commands your presence, Alice dear.

Turn away, and you’ll come to regret,

For Wonderland’s fury you shall never forget.”

I straighten up, the words echoing in my head. “Wonderland...” I whisper, looking out through the patio doors where I saw the rabbit. There’s no way I can ignore this. Curiosity might kill me, but I have to know.

Gran always said curiosity keeps you alive—or gets you into trouble. Honestly, I’m not sure which this one will be, but I have to look.

I slip out the back door, shutting it gently behind me so I don’t wake anyone in the house. The garden stretches in front of me, dark and shadowy, the wind biting with that chill that seeps into your bones. I pull my hood up, muttering to myself. “Right, Alice, this is just a joke. Someone’s twisted idea of fun.” Ted, maybe. Or maybe Grace told him about Wonderland. Or maybe I really am losing it. But what’s the harm in checking?

I take a deep breath, stepping onto the dewy grass, the cold soaking through my shoes. It’s so quiet out here—just the wind and the rustling leaves. The spot where I thought I saw the rabbit earlier looms ahead, pulling me closer.

I bet I’ll find Mum’s washing or something equally mundane. This is ridiculous. I know it is. It’s just plain crazy. What am I even thinking?

That the Queen of Hearts has invited me to her palace? One, she hates me. Two, why would she want me there? And three... “This isn’t real, and I’m definitely losing my mind,” I mutter.

But I keep going, toward where I saw the rabbit—where I saw nothing. Nothing, Alice. It’s nothing but your overactive imagination.

I can tell myself that all I want, but my feet keep moving. Mum’s garden is long and grand—a place where she hosts parties in the summer, everything perfectly kept. I walk down the path, careful not to step on her precious lawn. I get to the spot, and my heart stops, my stomach twisting. Right in the middle of the path lies another card.

I pick it up without peeling back the coating. It’s the same. The same as before.

“No. No, no, no.” I haven’t even stood up when I spot another card, further down the path.

“All right, Alice. You’ve officially lost it, or this is Wonderland’s version of a joke.” I snatch up the card, the familiar red ink vivid in the moonlight. For a second, I think about turning around, going back inside, curling up in bed, and pretending none of this happened. But then I see another flash of red ahead.

Another one.

“Go back to the house. You’re dreaming. You’ve fallen asleep,” I say, my voice shaky. But my feet keep moving. Before I know it, I’m at Mum’s rose bushes, and there’s another card. It’s like I’m being pulled toward them, and I can’t stop, even if I want to.

More cards lie scattered ahead—a trail leading me to the tree. *That tree*. The one I haven’t gone near since I was a child. The one Mum forbade me from going near, like it held some terrible secret.

I stop, staring at it. It looks the same as it always has—ancient, twisted, mysterious. The bark is gnarled and rough, beautiful in its own strange way. I swallow hard, my throat dry, and reach out, my fingers brushing the bark.

I remember this tree. I remember clinging to it, trying to find the way back to Wonderland. That was the worst part—when I came back, all I wanted was to go back again. But I never could. Never figured out how I got there in the first place. I think that’s why I let Mum convince me it wasn’t real. But it has to be. All these cards...

Maybe this is about escaping, about running from Gran’s death?

I press my fingers harder against the bark—sparks. Actual sparks. I yelp, jerking my hand back, my heart leaping into my throat. The tree moves. Its roots shift, twisting beneath the ground. I step back, panic setting in.

“What the—” I try to move, but the roots curl around my foot. Before I can react, I stumble backward, landing with a thud that knocks the wind out of me. The cards scatter from my hands, the Queen of Hearts fluttering across the grass.

I try to push myself up, but the roots keep moving. Then I see it—a face forming in the trunk, the bark twisting and shifting until eyes appear, then a mouth—grinning, wicked, full of teeth.

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” I whisper, my voice trembling.

The face leans down, the bark creaking and groaning as it moves and the mouth stretches even wider. Eyes appear—cat eyes, deep and blue, mischievous that glitter in the darkness.

The Cheshire Cat.

“Hello, Alice,” it purrs. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

I don’t even have time to scream. The ground beneath me gives way, pulled apart by the writhing roots, and I fall.

Down the rabbit hole.

Chapter Ten

HOOK

JUST A QUIET STROLL along some country lane. Yeah, right. Welcome to Wonderland—where nothing makes sense, and everything's out to piss me off. Well done, Wonderland. Mission accomplished.

I've been walking for what feels like hours, following the ridiculous riddle from that smug flower. Because apparently, that's what my life has come to. This place is a madhouse. I mean, I knew it would be. Everyone's heard about Wonderland and its chaos. But this? Twisted trees, distorted skies, and the air? It's like a mix of rot and desperation, with a splash of some sickly perfume that should've been poured down the drain a decade ago.

Perfect.

I stop, muttering under my breath, "Left or right. Wander or fall." The flower's cryptic nonsense echoes in my head. I let out a long breath, glancing around. "I'm getting nowhere." The ground warps beneath my feet, and the trees are practically bending just to screw with me.

The path winds ahead, never straight for long. Trees lean over, their branches like claws, trying to grab at each other—or me. The ground's uneven, roots rising like they're trying to trip me every step I take. And honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if that's exactly what's happening.

I stop again, looking behind me, and it's the same bloody thing no matter which way I turn. "Brilliant." I pull out my knife. Should've done this sooner.

I march up to one of the twisted trees, knife in hand, ready to carve a mark. Because clearly, this forest is playing tricks, and I'm not about to end up walking in circles like some idiot. My feet plant firm, hand braced on the bark—yes, hand. Still getting used to that—and I press the knife against the trunk, ready to carve my marker.

And that's when it happens.

A branch, out of nowhere, swoops down and smacks me square in the chest.

"Bastard." The force sends me flying. I hit the ground hard, my knife clattering against the rocks. The air rushes out of my lungs, and for a second, I'm just lying there, flat on my back, staring up at the swaying branches.

I hear it then. A low, mocking laugh, like the forest itself is enjoying the show.

I push myself up, wincing as I rub my chest. "What the hell was that?" I glare at the tree like it's personally offended me. And given the bruise I'll have, it damn well has.

I turn back to the path—only, it's not there. What should've been the way I came is now a mess of trees and twisted roots. The path I was on is gone, replaced by even more forest. "No way," I mutter, stepping closer to one of the larger trees. "That was not like that before."

I reach out, just to touch it—no knife this time, just a hand. But before I can even get close, *bam*—another branch slams into my side, knocking me into the next tree. I hit hard, stagger, and before I can catch my footing, another branch sweeps at my legs, sending me rolling into the dirt.

Pain flares across my cheek as the roots twist around me, gripping and pulling at my coat. "Oh, for—" I grapple for the knife, snatching it up just in time to hack at one of the roots. "Knock it off."

The branches pull back like they've been burned, retreating into the trees, the forest suddenly going still, as if it wasn't just trying to kill me a second ago.

"Having fun, are we?"

I snap around, searching for the owner of the voice. It's a sing-song drawl, but deep and dripping with malice. Not like the flower's voice. This one's more... amused. And I can't bloody see where it's coming from.

A branch flies at me—or is it thrown? I jump, swatting it away with my hand. Then another comes, and another. I bat them away, but it's

starting to get on my last nerve.

“Knock it the fuck off,” I shout, glaring into the shadows. “Show yourself, and stop being a coward.”

“Oh, but where’s the fun in that?” The voice shifts direction, and then more branches come at me, faster now.

I snatch up my knife, swinging it, cutting through the air. “Fun? You want fun? How about I chop down every last one of these trees and burn this forest to ash?”

The laughter grows louder, and more branches whip through the air, teasing, taunting.

“Oh, poor Captain Hook, all alone in Wonderland,” it sings, mocking. “Lost without a clue, stumbling around like a child.”

I sneer, rolling my eyes. “Oh, come now, love. Afraid to show yourself?” I flick a bit of dirt off my coat, smirking into the shadows. “Can’t say I blame you. I can be quite intimidating.”

“Such confidence,” the voice purrs, getting closer now. I feel it like a breeze at my neck, but when I spin around, nothing. “Tell me, Captain, do you really think you’ll make it out of here alive? Wonderland has a way of... changing people.”

“Oh, don’t flatter yourself,” I say, spinning around, trying to find the voice.

There’s a pause, and the air shifts—like whoever’s toying with me is considering whether or not to take me up on my challenge. I tighten my grip on my knife, ready for whatever’s coming next.

“You think you’re clever,” the voice finally says, a little softer, a little less smug. “But cleverness won’t help you here, Captain.”

I open my mouth to respond, but then something catches my eye—a flash of movement, quick and subtle. It’s barely more than a flicker in the shadows, but I see it. A tail, long and sleek, flicking around a tree trunk. Blue and grey, almost blending into the gloom.

I narrow my eyes, taking a step closer, ignoring the tightening in my chest. “Now, what have we here?” I say quietly, more to myself than to the disembodied voice. The tail disappears behind another tree, quick as a whisper, and the voice goes silent.

“Coward,” I mutter, rolling my shoulders and sheathing my knife. “They’re always cowards.”

Chapter Eleven

ALICE

"NO, FREAKING WAY. OH NO."

I land with a thud. Not graceful, not even remotely dignified—just face-first into something soft but somehow completely uninviting. I blink, trying to process where I am and what I'm doing because nothing makes a lick of sense. I refuse to believe it. Nope. I am not in bloody Wonderland, and this is not my life.

I close my eyes, taking a deep breath. Maybe if I try hard enough, I can fall back asleep. Is that even a thing? Can you fall asleep *inside* a dream? Because that's exactly what this is. A dream.

"I'm dreaming."

I raise my hands to my face, covering my eyes, hoping that when I open them again, I won't be lying in a field under a sky that twists and swirls like it's mocking reality. No, I'm back in my old room at Mum's house, and *this* is not happening. I can make that real.

"Dreaming, are we?"

I scream. I don't mean to, but it bursts out of me. My heart's racing like it's trying to escape, and I jump to my feet, spinning around.

There, sitting behind me, is a man—his skin glistening, blue, and somehow more vivid than anything else around me. He's perched on the one patch of color in this twisted place, legs crossed like he's in the middle of a meditation session.

"You are not real. You're not."

He opens his eyes, and they're bright—swirling blue and green, like the Mediterranean Sea on a perfect day. Stunning. Perfect. Terrifying.

"Alice..."

I throw my hand up, cutting him off. "Nope. Don't speak." I spin again, looking around wildly. I'm in a field—or what *used* to be a field. It might have once been vibrant and full of life, but now? It's twisted and dark. The grass is some sickly shade of green and blue, but it's lost whatever magic it might have once had.

"I'm just having a breakdown. That's all. Nothing to worry about. Brain overload. Totally fine. Fine and dandy."

"You know, people who talk to themselves are often quite mad. Are you mad, Alice?"

"Don't talk to me. Don't..." I squeeze my eyes shut. Calm. I need calm. What is this? Where am I?

I glance around, taking in my surroundings. I'm in a clearing. The trees surrounding me are gnarled and dark, and in between them, something flickers. Not glitter—no, more like tiny lights. I squint, trying to make sense of it. "Pumpkins?"

"To call on all the lost souls," the man says, his voice smooth and eerie.

I don't know whether to scream again or laugh, but I'm pretty sure I'm about to lose my mind either way.

I turn to him. "Who are you?"

He's smoking a pipe now. Of course, he is. A long, ornate pipe. He takes a slow, deep drag and then exhales, sending swirling rings of smoke around us. One of them drifts toward me, and for some absurd reason, I reach for it, like it's something I can grab. It slips over my hand, down my arm, and I catch it, like I'm handling something solid. I toss it back into the air because, really, why not?

"You've forgotten?" His voice is smooth, almost too calm for this madness.

His name is on the tip of my tongue, but I bite it back. He nods at me, like we're communicating telepathically, waiting for me to remember.

"Yes," he says, reading my mind. "You know."

"Absolem," I finally say.

He smiles—no, smirks—and pushes himself up. His delicate blue wings stretch out behind him, and for a moment, they catch the fading

light. But it's not him that's watching me. It's the shadows around us. They seem to move, twist, and pull at the edges of this warped world. The wind carries faint whispers, like it's alive.

"What happened to this place?" I turn and nearly smack into him.

He angles his head, those eerie eyes of his fixed on me, and when he exhales this time, the smoke hits me square in the face. Sweet, warm, and unsettling.

"What happened to you?" he asks, voice like silk.

"Nothing. I..." I stop myself and raise my hands to push him back but don't touch him. "I'm dreaming, that's all."

Absolem tilts his head down, looking at the ground where I'd landed. There, crumpled and bent, are the cards I'd collected. Not as bright as they were before. Somewhere in the distance, something sounds—like music, but twisted, like it's playing backward. It makes Absolem's eyes widen, and before I can ask what it is, he grabs my arm.

"Get into the trees."

He pulls me, and I have no choice but to follow. We duck into the shadows, hiding from whatever it is that's coming.

I have no idea what we're running from. Above us, in the sky, something swarms. I don't even know what to call them—bat-like, spider-like creatures. Whatever they are, they fly, and they're coming fast.

"Don't," Absolem says, yanking me back as I reach out to touch a pumpkin with glowing eyes. Its mouth twists into a sneer, and it hisses at me before rolling away. "You celebrate Halloween here?" I ask, trying to make sense of all this.

"Halloween?" Absolem chuckles. "It's the Night of Shadows here. You're here for the Queen's grand ball."

"I'm here because I've gone mad."

He smiles, that soft, knowing smile, and for a moment, memories I've buried start to creep up. The ones I didn't dare to dream about as a child. I see him, younger, still himself but a caterpillar then. His face still has those soft pink and pastel markings.

"But we're all a little mad down here, Alice. Don't you remember?"

The swarm above us is gone, and Absolem releases my arm. I stand and finally take a proper look at the world around me. A deep breath fills my lungs, but it does nothing to settle the unease. "This can't be real. It doesn't make any sense."

I reach out and touch the nearest tree, only to find the bark is soft—like fur. I pull back, stepping between the trees. The ground shimmers in places, dark and broken, roots spreading out, thorny and sharp.

“I found those playing cards,” I say, more to myself than him. “In my house. The Queen invited me to her palace.”

Absolem stays silent, following me as I walk and talk, mostly to myself. This place has that effect.

“I have to get to the palace.”

“You know the way,” he says, not as a question, but a statement. Maybe I do. Maybe if I close my eyes and remember those places I haven’t thought about in a long, long time.

Chapter Twelve

HOOK

ALRIGHT. Enough. No more bloody trees.

I don't even bother marking them anymore as I trudge forward. What's the point? They'll just shift around again. They've already done it—twisted the path like a drunken sailor on deck, making it feel like I've been walking in circles. But there, up ahead, I can see the end. Thank Christ.

I quicken my pace. The sooner I get out of this forest, the better. Only...
“No. Shitting. Way.”

I step out of the trees, breaking from their shadow, and there it is. The same damn road where the three paths meet. And right in front of me? That smug, mocking sign.

“The Queen's Palace,” it says, oh-so-helpfully. “Certain death.”

I glare at it. “It can't be the same one.” But I know it is, even without taking a closer look. Same damn sign, same damn crossroads. I let out a long, frustrated sigh. “Well, this is just bloody fantastic.”

Hands on my hips, I spin around, trying to figure out which path is the one I just came from. But they've all twisted together, just like everything else in this madhouse.

Right, screw it.

I close my eyes, stick out my arm, and point. “That one.”

I start walking again, teeth grinding, fists clenched. But—oh, hallelujah—no more twisted trees. These ones are different. Spread out,

taller, and a strange mix of colours—purples, blues, and other shades that don't quite sit right.

“Glass?”

The trees shimmer, delicate and perfect. Their branches catch the weak light from the warped sky, reflecting it back in strange, distorted ways. Curiosity gets the better of me for once, so I reach out, running my fingers along one of the branches. It ripples under my touch, like water instead of solid glass. The leaves, razor-thin and sharp as knives, shift in the wind, creating this low, eerie tinkling sound. Almost like music—ancient, haunting, twisted.

I pause. “Wait. Is that music... playing backwards?” I don't know how that makes sense, and honestly, I don't care.

The path pulls me deeper into the glass forest. The wind whistles through the branches, and the music grows louder. It's like the whole damn place is mocking me. But I'm not stopping for their nonsense this time. No way. This pirate's no fool. Not twice.

And then I see it—up ahead, a lake. Black as pitch, still as death. In the middle, a path of stepping stones stretches across the water. The riddle the flower gave me comes rushing back. *Cross the brook where dreams are lost.*

Dreams. Right. Like I've got any of those left to lose. But there's something about that water... it pulls at me, like it knows too much. Too many shadows lurking beneath the surface.

I step onto the stones anyway. No turning back now.

I'm halfway across when I catch sight of him—out of the corner of my eye. It makes me stop and tilt my head.

“What the...?”

It's a boy. Which would be fine, if it weren't for the fact that it's... me. A younger version of me, standing there in the water. Shorts, a Scooby-Doo t-shirt, dark hair a bit messy. And those eyes—bright blue, full of wonder, back when I still had some left.

I freeze, blinking hard. No. No fucking way.

He stares up at me, and I can't help but wave my hand across the water. He mirrors me, waving back.

“You're not real,” I mutter.

But I get down on my knees, kneeling on the stepping stone. I'm in the middle of this eerie pool, surrounded by glass trees that shimmer and

twist, their reflections rippling on the surface. I dip my fingers into the water. It's warm, almost inviting. But the boy's face doesn't ripple. Doesn't vanish.

"You're not real," I say again, pushing myself halfway up. No time for this. It's just another distraction.

But as I rise, I hear it. That soft, accusing voice. "You're leaving me. Again."

I freeze, narrowing my eyes at him. "I never left you."

He nods slowly. "You did. You left me. Left us."

I stare at him, feeling that familiar knot tighten in my gut. His voice doesn't waver, his gaze cuts right through me. "You walked away. You let it all happen. You left me there. Alone."

I want to look away, shove the feeling down, but his words dig in. "I did what I had to do," I say through clenched teeth, forcing myself to stand up and walk. But I don't need to look to know he's walking right beside me, step for step.

"You didn't just leave," he says, his voice following me. "You abandoned me."

"I..." I stop. And suddenly, he's not a boy on the water's surface. He's standing further back, not quite there, but not far. And I know this moment. Oh, I know it too well.

"You left."

The funeral. My mother's coffin. Lowered into the ground. The wind, sharp as a blade, cutting through my skin. My uncle's hand, heavy on my shoulder, telling me to "be a man."

Rage flares up in me, hot and quick. I don't want to see this. Don't need to relive it. "You don't know what you're talking about," I snap at him, shoving past the boy, forcing myself to leap to the next stone. But the image clings to the water's surface, shimmering, refusing to let go.

"I didn't leave you. It's how we survived."

"You didn't survive though, did you?" His voice is quieter now, but it hits harder. "You—"

"Enough." I roar, fists clenching, burning with anger. I'm ready to tear him apart, this version of myself. I don't owe him anything. Nothing.

I spin around to tell him just that, but he's gone. And in his place, standing there as if they'd been there the whole damn time, are the Queen's guards. Tall, faceless figures in blood-red armour.

I don't even think. I just react. I go to pull my sword—only to realise, of course, it's not there. Brilliant.

But a fight's a fight. And if these bastards want one, I'm not backing down. I raise my fists, slipping into my stance. Blade or no blade, I'm ready. "Come on, then," I growl. "Let's see what you've got."

The guards don't move. Not at first. Then, from the shadows, I catch a flicker of something. A tail. Blue-grey. And then it's gone. But I know exactly what that means.

"Traitorous cat," I mutter. Of course. Of course, he's involved.

I crack my knuckles, flexing my fingers. If the Queen's dogs want a fight, they've come to the right place.

Chapter Thirteen

ALICE

I STAND at the edge of the forest, staring into the dark, twisted mess of trees ahead. Riddles float in and out of my mind, but trying to catch them is like trying to grab smoke—impossible. Nothing in this place has ever made sense, has it? But somehow, deep down, I know the way. I just don't know how I know.

“Come on, Alice,” Absolem's voice cuts through my thoughts, calm as always.

“I can't—I...” I trail off, trying to force the pieces together in my head, but it's like a jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces. I'm still not convinced I'm not dreaming. Everything feels too surreal, like I'm stuck in that half-asleep state where nothing's quite real, yet everything is too vivid to ignore.

I take a breath and glance up at the trees. They loom like old nightmares, their twisted branches stretching out, reminding me of shadows creeping across my bedroom walls when I was a kid. I'd hide under the covers, pretending the monsters weren't real.

But here I am, stepping into the nightmare.

Each step is cautious, deliberate. The silence is unnerving. Absolem floats close behind, like my silent shadow. The bats are gone, but we stick to the trees, hiding in their shadows. The path is strange—everything is strange—but it almost feels like something's guiding me. The trees part

ahead, and I bow slightly, whispering a quiet “thank you.” I know, they’re just trees, but it feels right somehow.

One of the trees twists, its roots rising up from the ground. I freeze, but it doesn’t stop. The branch reaches out, its twigs forming into something that almost resembles a hand, pointing ahead.

“That way,” it seems to say.

But then, something else catches my eye. On the ground, half-buried in the dirt, is a knife. The handle is worn, cracked, but solid. The blade’s seen better days, but it’s sharp. Too sharp.

“Now that’s an odd thing to find in Wonderland,” I mutter, picking it up.

Absolem puffs on his pipe, the smoke curling lazily around him, dancing like it has a life of its own. “Many have walked these paths before you. Few have survived.”

Charming.

I pocket the knife, just in case, and follow him as he glides ahead. The trees are thinning, and something smells... different. Salty?

Not the dream-like, magical smell I’d expect here. No, this is something familiar. I pick up the pace, the path widening. And then I see it.

A beach.

“Seriously?” I stop in my tracks, hands on hips, shaking my head. “A beach? In Wonderland?”

Absolem doesn’t bother answering. He just keeps on along, like this is all perfectly normal. Of course he does.

I bend down, grabbing a handful of sand, letting it sift through my fingers. It feels real. Well, real enough.

“Is this... is this the Walrus and the Carpenter?” I murmur to myself, half-remembering something.

“The Walrus and the Carpenter

Were walking close at hand...”

The words tumble out before I can stop them, like they’ve been lodged in my brain all this time.

Absolem nods, as if my random quoting makes perfect sense. “You remember, Alice. You just forgot your wonder.”

I swallow, my chest tightening with that word. Wonder.

“I didn’t forget. I...” My voice trails off.

“This way,” Absolem says, already ahead, leaving a trail of dust and smoke behind him.

I hurry after him, but stop dead as we stumble upon something else. My heart skips a beat.

There they are—creatures chasing around a rock, the Dodo standing right in the middle, directing the madness. The same backwards music I’ve been hearing all along is playing here, not quite right, just as I remember it.

“I know this,” I whisper, squinting at the bizarre scene. The creatures run in circles, going nowhere, all while the Dodo stands tall, as if he’s in charge of this ridiculous chaos.

I barely have time to process what I’m seeing before a loud *whoosh* snaps me back to the present. The ocean. The damn ocean. A massive wave crashes towards the shore, its dark, foamy crest racing towards us. My heart leaps into my throat.

“Oh, hell no,” I mutter, spinning on my heel to run, but before I can take more than a few steps, something slams into me.

I stumble, nearly falling over as one of the creatures—some sort of bizarre, long-legged thing—runs straight into me. It looks down at me, completely unbothered, then shoves me aside, straight into the chaotic madness of the race. Great. Just freaking great.

I try to scramble to my feet, but the ground seems to shift beneath me, dragging me into the whirlwind of creatures running in circles. My head spins. Every time I try to break free, another one of those ridiculous beings bumps into me. They don’t stop, they don’t even acknowledge I exist.

Absolem appears beside me, somehow floating running through the chaos while I’m barely keeping my footing. Of course, he’s unfazed.

“Keep running, Alice,” he says calmly, like this is all perfectly normal.

“What do you mean, ‘keep running’?.” I shout, dodging another creature that nearly knocks me flat. “I’m trying to *get out* of this mess.”

Absolem just gives me one of those infuriating looks, puffing on his pipe, smoke swirling lazily around him. “There’s no getting out. Not yet. So keep running.”

I don’t have time to argue. Another wave crashes, this one closer, sending water splashing across the sand and soaking my feet. Great. Wet shoes. Just what I needed.

I grit my teeth and do as he says. I keep running, weaving through the chaos, dodging creatures that are all shapes and sizes—some with too many legs, others with none at all. The music grows louder, that same backwards, twisted melody, making my head pound.

“Why is this happening?” I shout over the noise, more to myself than to Absolem.

The air shifts. I don’t notice it at first, but then I hear the low, ominous flutter of wings—lots of wings. I glance up, and my heart skips a beat. The bat-like creatures from before, their silhouettes dark against the distorted sky, are circling overhead. Looming.

“Absolem ...” I mutter, my steps faltering.

He grabs my arm, yanking me out of the race and into the open. I stumble, my feet slipping on the wet sand, and I crash down, face-first, into the cold muck. For a second, I just lay there, groaning in frustration, sand sticking to my cheeks and in my hair.

“Get up, Alice,” Absolem says, his voice more urgent now.

I scramble up, ignoring the sting in my hands and knees, and we start running—really running—away from the race and those shadowy creatures circling above. The sand shifts beneath my feet, and every step feels like I’m sinking. I can’t move fast enough, can’t get away fast enough. “It’s not working.”

“Run, Alice. You need to run.”

We reach the edge of the beach, and ahead of us stand more trees, but these ones are different. They glisten in the dim light, their bark shimmering like they’re made of glass. Not the twisted, gnarled things from before, but tall and elegant, glowing purple under the strange sky.

But before I can take another step, I see them. The Queen’s guards, standing like statues at the edge of the forest, their blood-red armour gleaming ominously in the dim light. Their faceless helmets tilt ever so slightly, as if they’ve been waiting for us all along.

I stagger back, heart racing, only to realise we’re surrounded. They’re behind us too, pointing long, sharp spears at us. “Get down on your knees,” one of the guards commands, his voice sharp and cold.

I turn to look at Absolem, hoping for some kind of guidance, but he’s backing away. No—he’s fading. The smoke from his pipe swirls around him, and then he’s just... gone.

“No, don’t leave me...” I reach out instinctively, but he’s already disappeared into the mist.

“Good luck, Alice,” his voice echoes in the air, just a whisper now.

My body moves on its own, half-lunging as if to follow him, but the sharp press of spears stops me cold. Three of them are suddenly tucked under my chin, another two jabbed into my back. The metallic tips bite against my skin, a not-so-subtle reminder that there’s no escaping this.

One of the guards steps closer, bending down to bring his face level with mine. His helmet’s featureless except for the heart-shaped eyes, a twisted parody of affection. “The Queen will want to see you,” he says, his voice dripping with a strange kind of satisfaction.

Well. Isn’t this just my day?

Chapter Fourteen

HOOK

I'M TOSSED into the back of a heart-shaped carriage, which might've been nice once—if it weren't for the binds around my arms and the chain choking my throat. “Get the hell off me.” I shove at them, but it's useless. “I'm *Captain Hook*. Do you know who I am?”

I kick at the door, hoping to get some reaction, but they're ignoring me. Of course, they don't care. Why would they? No windows, no handles, just this prison box holding me in. There's a small slit near the top, and I press my face against it to peer out. The road beneath us is this eerie shade of orange, twisted and unnatural, like the sky threw up Halloween. Flecks of orange and red swirl past—magic, no doubt—making the whole scene look like some kind of fever dream.

The ride drags on forever. Every click of the chain, every rattle of the wheels against the uneven ground grates on me. I shout a few more choice words at the guards, but nothing. I catch glimpses of them when I strain to the slit at the back—they're on horseback, marching us forward. Only, the horses... they're not exactly normal.

These creatures look like they were stitched together in some madman's lab, their eyes glowing a sinister red, and their hooves sparking against the dark ground. Their breath comes out in huffs of smoke, curling like fog as they trot along. Figures. Even the damn horses here have to be nightmarish.

I let out a frustrated sigh, leaning back against the hard, uncomfortable wall of the carriage. "Brilliant. Just bloody brilliant."

I keep watch through the slits as we go, my only connection to the world outside this cursed carriage. The road is uneven, jerking me side to side like I'm some bloody sack of potatoes. Suddenly, we stop. I listen closely. Sounds like gates. Heavy ones. Chains clanking, gears rolling back into place. The guards are barking orders at each other, like a well-oiled machine, all falling into line, moving in perfect sync. Great. Just great.

Then, without warning, we're moving again, this time downhill. Steep. Too steep. The carriage lurches, and I slam face-first into the front with a hard thud. My forehead meets metal, and the sharp pain that follows is enough to make me see stars. "Watch what you're doing, you bastards."

My head throbs, the metal taste of blood faint in my mouth, but I manage to push myself up. The floor of this thing is as rocky and uneven as the road outside, making it damn near impossible to keep my balance.

"Let me see. Where are we?"

I peer through the slit again, squinting. The landscape outside has shifted, darker now, more foreboding. But I have to remind myself—don't complain. If Smee's here, this is where I need to be. And if the Queen has the amulet, well... I'll be thanking these guards soon enough for bringing me right to her doorstep.

Yes, thank them—after I get what I came for. And maybe, just maybe, I'll remind them how lucky they are I didn't tear them to pieces on the way here.

As soon as the carriage jerks to a stop, the door swings open, and I barely have time to take a breath before a pair of hands yank me out. Hard. Real hard. I stumble, the chain around my neck tightening as I'm dragged forward. "Oi, easy." I bark, but the guard just sneers, giving the chain another sharp tug that nearly sends me flat on my face.

They're not gentle about it, either. One grabs my arm, twisting it behind my back in a grip that's just shy of snapping something, while another digs his spear into my side, prodding me forward like I'm some animal. I've half a mind to kick them in the teeth, but I restrain myself. For now.

We march across the grounds, which are... well, let's just say they're fitting for a place run by the Queen of bloody Hearts. Twisted, blackened trees line the path, their gnarled branches reaching out like claws. The

grass beneath my boots isn't grass at all—it's some sort of slick, slimy moss that squelches underfoot. Lovely.

And then, just when I think they're content with hauling me like a sack of grain, one of the guards gets creative. With a sly grin, he jabs his spear into the ground, and the earth beneath me shifts. Before I know it, the ground itself is rising, pulling at my feet, trapping me up to my ankles in stone. I snarl, yanking my feet free just as they're about to solidify, but the guards chuckle.

"Come on, Captain," one of them hisses, his voice dripping with mockery. "Can't keep up? Thought you were legendary."

I lunge at him, but another guard whips the chain around my neck, jerking me back. "Careful now," he purrs, his face so close I can smell the rot on his breath. "Wouldn't want to make the Queen angry. She's got... plans for you."

"Yeah? Bring it. I have plenty of my own."

The guard smirks.

As we near the palace, I spot the gates. Heart-shaped, naturally. And beyond them, the palace looms, all crimson and black spires, like something out of a nightmare. But just before we reach the entrance, one of the guards reaches into his pocket and pulls out... what? A little jar? He pops it open, and I catch a glimpse of something wriggling inside—tiny, glittering, winged things. Fairies.

Without warning, he flicks them toward me. The moment they touch my skin, they explode into tiny sparks of fire, searing against my arms and neck. I grit my teeth, refusing to give them the satisfaction of hearing me scream, but it takes everything I've got not to.

The guards laugh, clearly pleased with themselves as I'm marched through the gates, smoke still curling off my skin from their little game.

"Welcome to the Queen's domain," one of them sneers. "Hope you survive the night, Hook."

Chapter Fifteen

ALICE

THEY DON'T EVEN GIVE me a second to think. One minute I'm standing there, trying to figure out how to make my grand escape, and the next thing I know, I'm being bundled into something small, round, and... oh, of course, heart-shaped. Seriously?

"Oi. I can walk, you know," I yell, trying to twist out of their iron grips, but nope. They don't care. Two of the Queen's goons lift me like I'm nothing. I'm sure I saw this on *CSI* once, well, not the queen part, but the being-captured part. Not that it does me any good.

"Hey—what the—put me down," I kick out, flailing, but it's like trying to fight against a wall of muscle. Fun.

They practically throw me into the carriage, and I land with a hard thud on the floor. "Ow. Seriously? A little gentleness wouldn't kill you."

"Quit complaining, Princess," one of them sneers before slamming the door shut. The click of the lock echoes in the cramped, dark space.

Great. Just freaking great.

I push myself up, glaring at the polished wooden floor. There's barely any room to move, let alone stretch out. It's dark, musty, and smells like... I wrinkle my nose. Old flowers? No, more like metal. Really comforting.

I crawl over to the tiny slit of a window, pressing my face against it to see where we're headed. The path outside is orange and twisted, like it's been sewn together from leftover scraps of different roads.

Magic swirls past the window, little sparks of light flickering by as we race down the road.

I sigh, leaning back against the carriage wall. “Okay, Alice. Breathe. You’ve survived worse situations... probably.” I knock on the walls for good measure, half-hoping they’ll hear me and maybe—just maybe—slow down. But, of course, no such luck.

After what feels like ages of being jostled around, the road suddenly dips. I go flying forward, face-planting into the front of the carriage with a lovely smack. “Watch it,” I shout, even though I know no one’s listening.

The ride gets bumpier, rougher. I glance through the slit again and see the path twisting ahead, like we’re on some kind of hellish roller coaster. We tip forward, and I have to cling to the side for dear life as we hurtle down a steep hill. My stomach lurches, and for a second, I swear I’m about to lose it.

“Alright, alright, I get it. You’re trying to make me puke. Success.” I groan, gripping tighter as we bounce along.

Eventually—finally—the wild ride slows down. I push myself up again, peeking through the window. We’re approaching something. Huge iron gates loom ahead, guarded by—what else?—more of the Queen’s lovely, charming soldiers. Beyond the gates is a massive palace, all sharp angles and dark towers stabbing into the sky.

“At least we’re here.”

The carriage jerks to a stop, throwing me forward again.

I hear chains clanking, the groaning of the gates swinging open, and the heavy stomp of boots outside. Lots of them. There’s shouting too, orders being barked out like this is some kind of military operation. Lovely.

The door swings open, and before I can even blink, I’m yanked out of the carriage by rough hands. “Hey. Easy.” I try to pull free, but they’ve got a vice grip on me, marching me straight through the gates towards the looming palace.

“I can walk, you know,” I grumble, but they’re not interested.

As we cross the courtyard, I steal glances at the palace. Black towers stretch into the distorted sky, red flags flutter ominously in the breeze, and the air smells like metal and smoke.

Heart banners flutter from the turrets, pumpkins line the grounds, and skeletons—ones I’m hoping are fake, but strongly suspect aren’t—dangle

like grotesque decorations. I try to take it all in, but the goons hauling me along aren't exactly giving me a leisurely tour.

Just as I'm bracing myself for the grand reveal, thinking maybe I'll finally find out what the Queen wants with me and all this mystery nonsense, they jerk me to the left. The sudden turn nearly knocks me off my feet, but of course, they don't bother slowing down for me to catch my balance. Why would they?

I open my mouth to complain, but the big one—the one doing most of the dragging—spins me around, his face inches from mine. "If I hear another word out of you, I'll pull your teeth out and wrap a gag around your head. Do you understand?"

My top lip curls, and I do my best to square my shoulders. "You could've just asked me to be quiet. No need for the dramatic threats."

He leans in even closer, and yikes, his breath smells like he gargles with swamp water. "Be quiet. I'm not asking." Then, without waiting for a response, he yanks me forward again, practically dragging me along the side of the palace. And yep, after another glance at the bones hanging around? Definitely real skeletons.

We approach a small gate, where two more guards open it with the same lack of ceremony as everything else around here. The brute beside me shoves me through the narrow opening, and I nearly faceplant into the stone wall. The air in here is damp and stale, and despite the dire situation, a small, absurd thought creeps in: what would Mum think of this place? She'd probably have a heart attack at the sight of the cobwebs alone.

They shove me down a flight of stairs. And then another. And another. Honestly, how far down are we going? It's pitch black, and I'm pretty sure I'm going to break my neck before we even get wherever the hell we're headed.

"Where are you taking me?" I ask, trying to sound calm, but of course, no one bothers to answer. "The Queen invited me, you know. I'm supposed to be here."

Still nothing.

I reach out, trying to grab hold of something, but I'm dragged away like I weigh nothing. "If she finds out you shoved me down here—look, I have an invite to her party."

The brute shoves me forward, hard, and I slam into a metal gate, the sharp clang echoing down the stone walls. "An invite, really?" He

snickers, and it's not a nice sound. "Because she's the one who told us to put you down here."

Chapter Sixteen

HOOK

THE MOMENT they haul me into the Queen's palace, I know they've made a mistake. Them, not me. Well, maybe a little bit me, because now I've got to wriggle out of this. Not usually a problem—other people's problems always become mine because, let's face it, they always fuck up. They always do. So maybe she'll do the same. We'll see. I've walked straight into the lion's den.

The guards drop me to my knees, hands tied behind my back, head bowed. I grit my teeth but say nothing. No point in fighting—yet.

The room is suffocating with grandeur, draped in rich crimson tapestries, the scent of roses clogging the air like a thick perfume, ready to choke the life out of me. Heart motifs everywhere, of course, but here they're darker, more sinister. Not whimsical nonsense—more like a warning.

Then I hear it. The slow, deliberate click of heels on marble.

I raise my head just enough to see her.

The Queen.

She's not what you'd expect. No garish dress, no over-the-top theatrics. She's all dangerous elegance—tall, poised, with long dark hair cascading down her back. Her eyes are sharp, cold, calculating—a predator assessing its prey. She's beautiful in the way a blade is beautiful—sleek, deadly, and likely to slit your throat while you admire her.

She circles me, her steps slow and purposeful, long fingers trailing lightly through the air, as if she's already toying with her prey. I keep my head down, playing the part—for now. I can play the good boy. Submission isn't my thing, but I'm not stupid. I know when to bide my time.

"Captain Hook," she drawls, her voice smooth as silk but edged with danger. Her fingers brush the back of my neck, sending an involuntary shiver down my spine. She leans in close, her breath warm against my skin as she speaks. "What on earth are you doing in my kingdom?"

I lift my head slightly, just enough to meet her gaze. Time to play the game.

"Your Majesty," I say, adding just the right amount of humility to my voice. "I've come seeking your aid."

Her lips curl into a slow, mocking smile. "My aid?" she repeats. She circles around to face me, her eyes never leaving mine, the train of her gown trailing behind her like a shadow. The room falls silent. Everyone is listening. Everyone is watching. And everyone is afraid. That's how you know she's a good ruler. "And what, exactly, could you possibly need from me?"

My ego's as big as her kingdom. This will be easier than I thought.

"Neverland," I begin, forcing a slight tremble into my voice. "Its magic is dying, fading. I came to you, hoping... you might assist us. I hear your magic is stronger than ever."

The Queen tilts her head, her eyes gleaming with something dangerous.

"My aid..." she repeats slowly, savouring the word. She steps closer, her fingers tracing a lazy line down my jaw, pausing at my chin to lift it, forcing me to look at her fully. Her smile sharpens, all teeth now—predatory. "Go on."

I bite back the urge to flinch. "Without magic, Neverland will fall," I continue, keeping my voice steady. "The children are ageing. The mermaids grow weak. Even the stars..." I pause for effect. "They don't shine as they used to. I've tried everything, but I need more. I need your help, or I fear—"

The Queen laughs softly, a sound almost musical, but there's nothing warm in it. "You need me." She's pleased. Her fingers trail down to my throat, her touch feather-light but with the threat beneath it. "How delightful."

She's loving this. Every second of it. I can see it in her eyes—the way they light up, the way her smile deepens. This is a woman who thrives on control, on watching others grovel for her favour. I don't blame her. She and I, we're cut from the same cloth.

"Help me," I say, lowering my gaze just enough to give her what she wants. "Help Neverland, and I swear, you'll have my loyalty."

Her fingers tighten slightly around my throat, not enough to hurt, but enough to remind me who's in charge here. Her lips curl into a satisfied smile.

"Well, isn't this interesting?" she purrs, turning away from me with a swish of her long gown. "The infamous Captain Hook, reduced to begging. How utterly delicious."

She saunters to her throne, settling into it with the grace of a panther, her eyes never leaving me. I'm nothing more than a toy to her, a plaything.

"Captain," she calls to one of her guards—a tall brute of a man, clad in the same blood-red armour as the others. He steps forward, eyes locked on me. "See to it that our guest is given a room." She waves her hand dismissively. "Get him cleaned up, too. He smells of fish and seawater. I despise the ocean."

The guard steps closer, yanking me up by the chain that binds my wrists. I stumble to my feet, shooting him a glare, but he's already dragging me towards the door.

"Oh, and Captain," the Queen calls out, stopping us. "Make sure he doesn't leave his room." Her smile widens. "I'd hate for our guest to... wander."

The guard grunts in response, and I'm shoved out of the throne room and into the corridor. My mind is racing. The Queen might think she's got me where she wants me, but she's about to find out she's in for more than she bargained for.

As I'm led away, her mocking laughter echoes behind me, but I can't help the small smirk tugging at my lips.

Let's play, shall we?

Chapter Seventeen

ALICE

DARKNESS PRESSES in on all sides. For a moment, I'm not even sure if my eyes are open. There's no difference between them shut and wide open—it's all just the same inky blackness, swallowing everything whole. My heart pounds hard against my ribs, fast and uneven, and I have to swallow down the rising panic that's threatening to choke me.

Okay, Alice, deep breath. Breathe in ... Breathe out ...

I feel the cold stone wall behind me, rough against my back, and the damp floor beneath me, chilling my legs. My head throbs where I was slammed into the gate—whatever that was—and I wince, rubbing the spot. As if I needed an extra knock on the head. Perfect.

I push myself up, fingers splayed against the wall for balance, and take a step. The space feels small, like I could stretch my arms out and touch both sides if I tried. I'm in some kind of cell. Fantastic.

I blink, hoping my eyes will adjust, but nope. Still pitch black. Typical. I try to take stock of what I know—spoiler alert: it's not much. The last thing I remember is being shoved down here by those goons, and now I'm stuck in this... whatever it is.

So much for a party invite. Thanks, Queen.

I step forward, my foot hitting something solid. I reach down, feeling around—iron bars. Of course.

“Hello?” I call out, my voice bouncing off the cold walls. “Is anybody there?”

Nothing. Not even the faintest whisper of a response. The silence is heavy, almost suffocating, pressing down on me like a weight. I take another breath, steadying myself. Okay, Alice, think. You've been through worse. Probably. Maybe. I grip the door handle, giving it a rattle for good measure, though I know it's not budging.

I grind my teeth, resisting the urge to scream. "Hello?" I try again, but still nothing. No creak, no shuffle. Just the sound of my voice echoing back at me, falling into the void.

This is ridiculous.

I slump back against the wall, sliding down until I'm sitting on the damp floor. This is not ideal. Where am I? Why am I here? None of this makes any sense. The more I think about it, the more my head spins.

Think, Alice. Just go over everything.

I had five invites from the Queen—five. She wanted me here. So why throw me into some dingy cell? It doesn't add up. I lean my head back against the wall and close my eyes, trying to force my brain into coming up with a plan, but everything's a blur. My thoughts tumble over each other—fragments of riddles, half-remembered stories.

I've been here before.

Wonderland. I mean, not this cell. Last time, I wasn't locked up. But then again, that was just a dream. It *was* a dream. Right?

This has to be a dream. It feels like it. Distant, fuzzy memories float around in my head, ones I can't quite grab hold of.

I press the heels of my hands into my eyes. **Absolem...**

Would I have left him behind if the situation were reversed? Maybe. Maybe not.

I push down the frustration bubbling up inside me. Focus. I'm not getting out of here by sitting on my backside doing nothing.

I get to my feet again, pacing the length of the cell. One step, two steps—yep, it's that small. I bump into the bars again, still no sign of life. What now? Shout more? Scream? It doesn't seem like it'll do much good, but I'm not exactly overflowing with options here.

Maybe there's a way out I haven't found yet. I start feeling around the walls, hoping for some secret door or window, but my hands skim over nothing but cold, unyielding stone. Brilliant.

Just as I'm about to give up and flop back onto the floor, something flickers to my left. I freeze, squinting into the darkness. There it is again—

a faint glimmer of light. Where's it coming from?

"Hello?" I call again, my voice a little shaky this time. "Is someone there?"

No answer. But that light—it's real, isn't it? I move towards it, careful not to trip over anything. It's dim, but it's enough to make out the edges of my surroundings. My hand brushes along the rough wall until I find a small gap—a vent? No, too small for that. I bend down, peering through the crack, and then... holy—there's someone in the cell next to mine. A figure, hunched over and quiet, their face half-hidden in shadows. I can just make out the edges of something... a rough patchwork coat, dark floppy hair, sunken blue eyes.

I press closer to the gap. "Hello? Who's there?"

The figure shifts, lifting their head slowly, and my heart skips a beat.

No freaking way.

"The March Hare?" I whisper.

"Alice," the voice is soft, raspy, but familiar in a way that sends a jolt of recognition through me. My breath catches.

He raises his head fully to look at me. "You came," he says, his voice hoarse and tired. "I wasn't sure you would."

I frown, trying to angle myself to see him better. In my dreams, he was a rabbit—big floppy ears and all—but here? He's all big floppy hair.

"The Queen invited me," I say, my voice a little sharper than intended. "What's going on? Why are you here?"

He grimaces, turning slowly towards me. In his hand, he lifts something—a card. He holds it up for me to see.

It's the same card I've been finding back at my mother's house.

"We need your help," he whispers, his eyes dark and full of something I can't quite place.

I stare at the card in his hand, my mind spinning, my heart sinking. "The Queen didn't send for me, did she?" I ask, my voice low.

The March Hare's eyes meet mine.

"No," he says, his voice a mixture of sorrow and resolve. "I did. Wonderland is dying."

Chapter Eighteen

HOOK

THE MOMENT they shove me into the room, I already know how this is going to play out. The door slams shut behind me with a heavy thud, followed by the unmistakable sound of a bolt sliding into place, locking me inside. I stand there for a moment, letting the silence settle around me. Then, as if on cue, I smirk.

"Locked up like a common criminal," I mutter under my breath. "How charming."

But of course, the Queen's idea of a prison is far too posh for someone like me. The room itself is draped in dark silks, lit by flickering candles that cast long shadows across the walls. The furniture, though grand, is worn, the kind of wear and tear that suggests it's not used often. There's a bed too large for anyone with sense, a vanity, and a wardrobe that's seen better days. But I'm not here to admire the décor.

I immediately turn to the door and test the handle. I know it's locked, but it's always worth checking. I press my ear to the wood, listening for footsteps or guards on the other side, but there's nothing. Silence. Either they're confident I won't escape, or they don't care if I try. Fools.

I pace the room, eyes flicking to the window. Outside, the night is dark, with just enough moonlight filtering through to illuminate the twisted architecture of the palace. The Queen clearly has a flair for the dramatic—spires, turrets, and odd, intricate decorations climbing up the walls like they were made for someone to scale. Perfect.

First, I try the adjoining door tucked away in the corner, half-hidden behind heavy curtains. I grip the handle and give it a twist—locked. Of course. I move to the window, pushing it open, and the cool night air hits my face. I lean out to inspect the wall. The Palace’s decorations aren’t just for show—there are enough ledges, vines, and grotesques to make climbing up almost too easy. It’s like she gave me the key herself.

“Well then,” I say, cracking my knuckles. “Let’s go out for a little stroll, shall we?”

I swing one leg out of the window, grabbing hold of a stone gargoyle jutting from the side of the palace. The climb isn’t comfortable—sharp edges dig into my hands, and my boots scrape against the stone—but I’ve done worse. Far worse. I pull myself up, moving with the practical ease of someone who’s made a career out of slipping in and out of places he doesn’t belong.

As I climb higher, I glance down at the courtyard below. Guards patrol, their helmets gleaming in the moonlight. I make a mental note to avoid that particular area. After a few minutes of climbing, I reach a ledge wide enough to stand on. I peer through the window in front of me. It’s an empty room, dark, save for the faint glow of embers in a fireplace.

I ease the window open and slip inside, landing softly on the floor. The room smells like old wood and dust, clearly abandoned for some time—chairs draped in sheets, books stacked haphazardly on the floor. Not much to see here. I move quickly, slipping through the door and into the corridor beyond.

The palace is a maze of twisting hallways and grand staircases. I keep to the shadows, avoiding the patches of moonlight spilling through the windows. I don’t know exactly where I’m going, but I trust my instincts. The Queen is hiding the amulet—I can feel it. Its magic pulses, calling to me.

I pass a room where a couple of guards are laughing and playing cards at a table. Pressing myself against the wall, I hold my breath as they continue their game, oblivious to the fact that I’m just a few feet away. Once they’re distracted again, I slip past, moving deeper into the palace.

I duck into a stairwell and begin to climb. The air grows colder the higher I go, the walls closing in as the grand palace gives way to something more... forgotten. Dust gathers on the steps, cobwebs cling to

the corners. I keep moving, breathing steady, steps careful. Neverland's magic feels closer now, tugging at me like a thread.

I reach the top of the tower, a heavy door in front of me. It creaks as I push it open, the sound echoing in the hollow space beyond.

Inside, the tower is a graveyard of forgotten things. Old furniture piled in corners, broken mirrors, and chests filled with moth-eaten clothes. It's the kind of place no one's visited in years—maybe decades. But it's the mirror in the centre of the room that catches my eye.

It's massive, taller than me, framed in tarnished gold with intricate designs curling around the edges like vines. It's old—older than anything I've seen in this palace.

Interesting.

I step closer. The mirror is dark, its surface dull and cloudy, like it hasn't been polished in years. But something about it pulls me. There's power here. Is this what I was feeling?

I run my fingers along the cool surface of the frame, and sparks fly up where my touch leaves a trail.

"You were calling to me," I say, wiping the dust from the surface.

Straightening up, I tilt my head with a dramatic flourish. "Oh, I know you. Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is—" I pause, smirking. "Oh, don't tell me. I already know it's me."

I chuckle at my own joke, but the sound dies in my throat as the mirror begins to change. The dark, cloudy surface ripples like water, and slowly, an image starts to form. The mirror sighs—not in a way that's audible, but I can feel it. The air around me shifts, and the mirror seems to sag, as though tired. Exhausted.

"I know that feeling," I mutter.

"Captain Hook," it says, its voice raspy, like it's been asleep for centuries and is only now waking. A faded, ghostly face appears in the surface. "You are..." It pauses. "Far from the fairest."

I raise an eyebrow. "Oh, do go on."

The mirror's surface ripples again, and this time it shows me something—a dungeon, dark and damp, buried deep beneath the palace. Chains hang from the walls, and in the centre of the room, a figure sits huddled on the cold stone floor.

Is that...? I step closer, squinting at the image.

She's sitting cross-legged, her hair a tangled mess, but there's fire in her eyes. She looks determined. Angry.

"This," the mirror says, its voice low and ancient, "is the answer you seek."

I frown, staring at the image of a woman who seems familiar. "What do you mean?" I reach out, my hand brushing the surface of the mirror. "What answer?"

The mirror ripples again, the image of the girl fading in and out, like it's struggling to hold on. "She is the key... the one who will unlock what you need."

I narrow my eyes. "Unlock what, exactly?"

The mirror's light dims, its surface growing dull again as the image disappears into fog.

"She is your answer," the mirror whispers, and the light fades entirely, leaving me standing alone in the tower.

"Who the hell is she?" I mutter. "And what is she doing here?"

Chapter Nineteen

ALICE

"YOU TRICKED ME?" I say, the words sticking in my throat. *Tricked me.* I want to say more—shout more—but I'm not even sure what I'm supposed to say to that. My mind's spinning, my head's in full *what-the-hell* mode, and everything inside me is rattling loose. I want to scream, to throw something, to be angry at someone—at something.

But instead, I step back from the small gap in the wall, trying to give myself a second, just one second to breathe, to think, to not let this place swallow me whole. I press my hands to my face, take a shaky breath and try to ignore the cold and damp I'm stuck in because of someone else's agenda.

"Why?" I whisper. It's not really a question I need answered. I'm not even sure he can answer it.

On the other side of the wall, there is movement again. A shuffle, a sigh, and then the dim light from his cell flickers through the small heart-shaped hole in the stone. Of course, it's heart-shaped. Why wouldn't it be?

"We didn't have a choice," he says, his voice low, soft. It's sad, and I don't like the way it sounds—how it feels to hear that sadness—but I also don't like being tricked or manipulated. I had enough of that back in London, enough of that from my mother. That's why I left and tried to start a new life. One without anyone pulling at my strings.

"You could have just asked me," I say, louder this time. "You could have come and asked."

There's a long pause, the kind that stretches until you're not sure if the person is even still there. When he speaks again, his voice is barely above a whisper.

"We didn't think you'd come."

I let out a bitter laugh, the kind that feels wrong. "So instead of asking me, you thought the best plan was to trick me? To drag me here with some fake invitation from the Queen? How did that work out? Because now I'm in here with you."

I swear I feel him flinch, even if I can't see him. And I know that isn't possible, and maybe it's my own projection.

His silence is louder than any words could ever be. I don't mean to make him feel bad. It isn't my intention. Hare, Absolem, they mean the world to me, and it shocks me to think of that, because all my life, since I was last here, I've pushed them away, not thought about them. But really, I think I pushed away what I felt. I pushed away what my mother told me wasn't real, and I so desperately needed it to be.

"I would have come," I say, the words slipping out before I realise it. I don't know where they came from either, but they're there now, raw and real.

For years, Wonderland has been in the back of my mind. It was the most wonderful adventure. And it felt real to me. It felt like home. It had been the one place in the world where I felt like I belonged, even with all its madness, all its chaos. I *would've* come, I think.

The Hare doesn't respond right away, but I can feel him on the other side of the wall, hear the faint rustle of movement. It's almost like he knows what I'm feeling—like he's waiting for me to make sense of it for myself.

"I *would've* come," I repeat, a little more forceful this time. "You didn't have to trick me."

There's a soft sigh and then his voice filters through the gap. "We didn't know how else to reach you. Wonderland is falling apart. She's taken everything from us. Everything."

I close my eyes, leaning my forehead against the cool stone.

"Who?" I almost know, of course. It's always her. The Queen. She gives my mother a run for her money on the narcissism scale.

"The Queen," he says. "She's mad. Madder than before. Power hungry. Greedy. She..."

His sadness pulls at me, it's thick and heavy in his words, and I move from the wall and go back to the hole to peer through. He's leaning against the wall, crouching.

"What happened?"

He turns his head a little to look at me. "She got greedy. She's been stealing magic from other worlds. She drained Wonderland almost dry, to the point it is dying, and the same with other worlds too. She can't get enough, and we can't stop her. We thought..."

"Other worlds?" Even as I say the words, I want to tut at my own naivety. There was Wonderland, of course there are other places, other portals just like that one. But it feels so odd, so strange to me. In my world, we're taught magic doesn't exist. It's the thing of fairy tales and stories we just want to dive into. It's the hope and wish that on your eleventh birthday, you get an invite, and when it never comes, it's just the final confirmation, almost like Santa, and the Easter Bunny and all the other whimsical things parents use to control their children. None of it is real.

But it is...

Maybe?

I *want* to believe it. I want to step out of that zone in my head that says this is all some strange, grief-induced dream. I want to understand.

The Hare nods. "Avalon, Narnia, Neverland, Frostfell, Thornvale. All of them." He reels off more names. Places I know, some I don't.

The names make my heart slip. *They're real?* I pull away from the wall. And the Hare's voice comes through, barely audible.

"She's draining them dry, consuming everything she can find, but it's never enough. She's never satisfied."

My mind flashes back to the Wonderland I remember—the vibrant colours, the whimsy, the madness that somehow made sense. And now, this dark, twisted, decaying world.

"Is that why Wonderland looks like it does?" I press my palms into my eyes, trying to make sense of everything, and more importantly, trying to push away the rising tide of emotions. I take a deep breath, trying to pull it all the way into my lungs, steadying myself. "Do you know why she is stealing all their magic?"

"She wants to be the only one. The only ruler. The only source of magic."

I swallow hard.

“She’s been after power since the beginning, and she had it, but then you came along and defeated her...” He pauses, as if struggling to find his words. “You showed her she had a weakness. You made her vulnerable. She vowed never to be beaten again.” He clears his throat and stands stronger now. “When you beat her the last time, you were supposed to ... You were supposed to stay.”

“I was just a child.”

“It doesn’t matter. Wonderland doesn’t know that. Her magic started to die, it started to fade, and she couldn’t have that. She figured out a way to keep it, but it means taking it from all the other places.” His voice grows heavier with each word. “She took everything from Wonderland first—its magic, its life. And when that wasn’t enough, she started taking from other worlds. But it’s not working. The magic never stays, and now... now Wonderland is paying the price.”

“Why didn’t anyone tell me?” I ask, my voice cracking. “I thought it was all a dream. I didn’t know—I thought it was just my imagination. That’s what my mother told me. I...” It sounds pathetic, stupid. Standing here now, with him, it sounds stupid. It feels idiotic. “You want me to defeat her again?”

The Hare says nothing for a moment, but I dare to look at him. There’s something there, something he isn’t saying.

“We hope you can. There’s nothing left. If you can’t...” He shakes his head, his voice thick with uncertainty. “We’re not sure how long Wonderland has left.”

“I don’t know how to defeat her.” My words tumble out in a rush. “Last time, it was all a stroke of luck. Just silly games she played, and I happened to win. I’m not sure—”

He cuts me off. “You still have the magic in you. Just because you don’t believe it, doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. Just like this place. You thought we weren’t real, a dream? But we are. We’re here.” He stands taller now, coming close to the hole in the wall, only the bricks between us as he stares at me. His eyes meet mine, and I can feel the sincerity in them.

“I used to see you as a hare when I was a child. In my head, you were the Hare and we had tea, and in your pocket...”

The figure standing before me isn't the March Hare I remember. Gone are the floppy ears and twitching whiskers that used to poke out from beneath his oversized hat. Instead, he looks... human. But not quite. There's something off, something that still whispers of the hare I knew from childhood.

He's tall, taller than I expected, with lean limbs that move with a fluid, almost unnatural grace. His skin is pale, like the soft underbelly of a rabbit, with a faint shimmer to it, as though dusted with moonlight. His hair is a wild mess of dark, thick curls, streaked with silvery strands that catch the dim light. But it's his ears that draw my attention—their subtle points, not quite human, not quite animal. Like the echo of his former self clings to him, reminding me of the creature I once shared tea with.

His eyes are large and dark, almond-shaped, and they glint with a knowing intelligence, the kind that only comes from living through madness. There's a sharpness to his features, almost fae-like, as if he's walked out of one of those magical realms I've only read about in books. His clothes are patchwork, still mismatched like before, but now they hang on him with a strange elegance, as if he's both part of the earth and something entirely otherworldly.

As he moves, I catch sight of something twitching beneath his coat—a flicker of motion that reminds me of a tail. My heart skips a beat, but I tell myself it's just my imagination. Still, there's a wildness about him, an energy that can't quite be tamed. His hands are long and slender, his fingers ending in sharp nails that look as though they've dug through too many forgotten things.

He reaches into his coat and pulls out a little sleeping mouse.

"We've always been here, Alice. We've been waiting for you to come back."

Chapter Twenty

HOOK

A CREAK. A thud. My pulse spikes instantly, ears sharp as I catch a sound from somewhere outside the tower. Bloody hell. I step closer to the window, boots silent on the stone floor, and peer through the warped glass. The courtyard below is alive with movement—more guards than before. Something’s going on. The air hums with tension, and I can’t make out exactly what’s happening, but it’s enough to set my instincts on edge.

I pull back from the window, frowning. Whatever it is, it’s not good.

And, as if on cue, the mirror—oh yes, that delightful, cryptic piece of furniture—flares into life behind me. The dull surface ripples again, but I can practically feel its impatience.

“Hurry,” it says, voice dripping with urgency. “There’s no time.”

I grit my teeth, casting a glance over my shoulder. “Do tell.”

“The guards are coming.” The mirror flickers and fades, showing me the guards marching through the halls. Then the surface swirls once more, turning murky. That raspy voice fills the room, low and grating. “You must return. If they find you here, all will be lost.”

“I’m going,” I mutter, heading back to the window. No need to ask what the mirror means—I’m sure I know exactly what the Queen’s guards do to people like me, wandering around her palace uninvited.

I swing a leg over the windowsill, pausing for a moment to gauge the drop. It’s not the climb that bothers me—it’s the timing. I hear a distant

clang, followed by the unmistakable stomp of boots. Bollocks, they're getting closer.

With one last glance at the mirror—still flickering and whispering its warnings—I swing myself out and grab the ledge below. The stone is slick under my hands, but I keep moving. No time to think. No time to hesitate. I'm out of here.

I climb down the wall, fingers gripping the twisted carvings, jagged edges covering the palace like a grotesque spider's web. Beneath me, the guards gather, their voices rising in a low murmur. I catch snippets—something about a ball, prisoners being moved, and that damn Queen with her flair for the dramatic.

I freeze for a second, pressing myself flat against the wall as two guards pass directly below me. One looks up—just for a second—and I hold my breath. But then they move on, none the wiser. Fools.

I reach the window to my room and haul myself inside, dropping down lightly on the floor. The room is still as I left it—dark silks, flickering candles, the air thick with dust and decay. It's almost too easy to slip back in like I was never gone.

And then, as if the gods themselves are playing with me, there's a loud bang, followed by the heavy clatter of approaching footsteps.

"Perfect timing," I mutter just as my door slams open.

A guard barrels in, his helmet gleaming in the low light. He's holding a suit draped over his arm. He shoves it at me. So much for etiquette.

"Put these on."

I take the clothes. They're the finest royal attire, I see. No expense spared on the Queen's part—black, velvet waistcoat, tight black trousers, boots with a shine that makes me want to gag, and a long, perfectly cut leather coat, the stitching intricate and tailored to fit like it was made for me.

My gaze locks with the guard's for a split second, his expression hard, like he's done this a thousand times. He reaches into his belt, pulling out a small black mask that covers only the eyes. He flicks it towards me, and I catch it, raising an eyebrow.

"Get up," he snaps, voice as sharp as his posture. "The Queen wants you downstairs. Wear this."

I smirk, can't help myself. "What, no red carpet?"

The guard's eyes narrow. "Just put the damn suit on."

I glance at the clothes, noting the rich fabric, the intricate designs. The Queen certainly knows how to make an impression, I'll give her that. The waistcoat alone looks like it was stitched with shadows and secrets, and the long coat? Well, it might just fit me perfectly. I pick up the mask, running my fingers over the smooth material.

"Bit formal for a trip downstairs, don't you think?" I say, slipping the waistcoat over my shoulders, letting the weight of the coat settle against my back. The leather feels like a second skin—tailored, as if it was made for me. My kind of party, then.

"You have two minutes," the guard grunts, clearly losing patience, arms crossed, watching me like I'm some common criminal dressing for an execution.

I tug on the boots, grinning. "Don't worry, love. I wouldn't dare keep her waiting."

He grunts in response, stepping back as I straighten my collar, securing the mask in place. It fits perfectly, of course—covering just enough to give an air of mystery, but leaving everything else on display. I catch a glimpse of myself in the small, dusty mirror on the wall. If nothing else, I look the part.

Damn, I make this look good.

"Lead the way," I say, flashing the guard a mocking bow.

Without a word, he grabs my arm, dragging me toward the door. The Queen's games are just beginning, and I'll be damned if I'm not ready to play.

Chapter Twenty-One

ALICE

MY HEAD FEELS like it's going to crack open. I press my forehead against the cold, rough stone wall, breathing in deeply, trying to make sense of the mess swirling around inside my brain. Everything is jumbled. The hare keeps talking—he's been talking for what feels like hours—but it's all just noise. None of it is clicking. I was a kid the last time I was here—a child, stumbling into Wonderland with no idea what I was doing. I fell into that hole by accident.

"I don't know how to help," I mumble. "Last time I..." What? Did nothing? Got lucky? The words die in my throat because that's the truth. I didn't do anything. The Queen had me on trial for something ridiculous—something I still don't understand—and her logic was nonsense. Sentence first, verdict second. That's what she told me.

"You stood up to her," a voice says, but it's not the Hare this time. It's a new voice, a girl's voice, coming from the other side of the cell. I lift my head, blinking in the dim light.

Am I the only one stuck in the dark? Literally and figuratively? There's a clicking sound, like tiny pieces of porcelain tapping together, and then light flickers through another heart-shaped hole in the wall.

I frown. Someone else is in here? I really need to stop thinking my world revolves around what's happening in my head. Of course, someone else is here. Of course, it's not just me and the Hare.

"You have magic," the voice says again.

I push away from the wall, separating myself from the Hare, and angle toward the new voice. I squint at the heart-shaped hole, but all I can make out is an eye. Porcelain smooth, too perfect to be human.

“How many of us are down here?” I ask, because I can’t quite process anything else right now.

The Hare answers first. “As many as the Queen can capture.”

“Maybe twenty,” the girl adds. “There were more of us. We used to talk to each other, but the Queen doesn’t like that. The guards take us away if they catch us.”

I walk over to the hole, bracing my hands on either side as I peer in. “Why are you down here?”

“The same as anyone, silly. For our magic,” she replies.

“The Queen uses it,” the Hare explains. “She takes it from us and uses it for herself. One day, there’ll be nothing left but her.”

I pause, trying to wrap my head around it all. I might be the one who always had her head in the clouds, but I also prided myself on being logical—thinking things through. My thoughts aren’t tied to appearances like my sister’s or boxed in by social rules like my mother’s. No, Dad used to say logic was my power. I need to tap into that now, but it’s hard. Maybe it’s my gran’s death, or maybe it’s the sheer weight of everything else coming down on me.

“Then why am I down here?” I ask, my frustration bubbling up. “If it’s about magic, then I shouldn’t be here. I don’t have any. I’m just... well, *me*. Just human. I...”

The girl laughs softly, a warm, gentle sound. “Everyone in Wonderland has magic.”

I frown, confused. “But I’m not from Wonderland. Magic, in my world, is the stuff of fairy tales.”

“We’ve heard about your stories,” she says. “Books that pretend to be made up, but they’re not. They’re trying to tell you what’s possible—what’s real. You just don’t see it.”

I tilt my head, taking in her words. “So, you’re telling me that all those stories... that there’s a school for wizards out there? And a magical land somewhere over the rainbow?”

The Hare’s voice comes through, calm and certain. “Of course there is.”

"Magic isn't about where you're from," the girl adds softly. "It's about belief."

I lean back against the wall, thinking this over, my fingers tracing the rough stone behind me. "If magic were real—if *I* had magic—then I'd be able to get us out of here, right?" I slide down the wall until I'm sitting on the floor, knees tucked to my chest. My heart feels heavy, and I run my fingers through my hair, trying to make sense of everything. "But I can't. I don't have anything like that."

"You don't use it, but it's there," the girl says, her voice still kind. "You don't feel it because you've buried it. What happened to you, Alice?" she asks gently, as if she can sense the ache inside me. "Why did you push away who you are?"

I freeze, goosebumps prickling my arms as her question lingers in the air. What *did* happen to me? Why did I push all this away?

"It's inside you, Alice," the Hare says softly from his side of the wall. "The magic is there. You just have to believe it."

"This is just... too much," I murmur, more to myself than to them. Part of me—some tiny part—wants to believe. What if this is real? What if I am something more? But still, I remind myself, this is Wonderland. Nothing ever makes sense here. "But this isn't real. None of it is. That's how I got home last time—by realising it wasn't real. That it all didn't exist."

"No. You went home because you stopped believing. You let the wonder drain out of you, and Wonderland pushed you out," the Hare says.

"It starts with belief," the girl adds, her voice calm yet insistent. "You can't use magic if you don't believe it's there."

I sit quietly, caught in my own thoughts. "I'm real because I was born," I murmur, my confidence wavering. "I'm real because of my parents, because I exist. That doesn't feel like magic."

The Hare shifts gently in his cell, his tone thoughtful. "And you don't think life itself is magic? That your very existence, your being here, isn't woven from the same magic that makes Wonderland what it is?"

For a moment, I don't respond. I exhale slowly and push myself up, legs shaky but just strong enough to hold me. I turn toward the heart-shaped hole on the other side of my cell, my fingers pressing against the cold stone as I peer through. "If I have magic, then how do I use it?"

The girl standing on the other side steps back from the wall, and that's when I see her clearly. She's not human. She's a porcelain doll, her face smooth and pale, almost gleaming in the dim light, as if untouched by time or the grime of the dungeon. Her eyes, large and round, are an unsettling shade of glassy blue, reflecting light with an almost eerie glint. Delicate, painted-on lashes frame her eyes, frozen in place like they were carefully crafted by a patient hand.

She wears an old-fashioned dress, the once-vibrant blues and golds now faded, but still intricate, with lace trimming the sleeves and hem. The fabric clings to her stiffly, not flowing as fabric should, giving the impression of something too perfect, too controlled. Every stitch on the dress is too neat, too precise, as though it was sewn by someone afraid of a single mistake. Her lips are painted in soft rose, perfectly shaped, but unmoving, frozen in a delicate expression.

She's fragile and beautiful, but there's something unsettling about the way she stands there, motionless yet somehow alive.

"You close your eyes Alice. You close them and then reach down inside you."

So, I try. I take a breath, pushing away the swirling thoughts of *I can't believe I'm doing this*, and reach for that part of me I've buried for over a decade. The part of me that once believed in the impossible, that used to wonder *what if?* I close my eyes and focus on that flicker of hope, on the possibility that maybe, just maybe, there's something left in me.

I push it toward the cell, toward the walls, toward the gate.

For a second, there's a faint warmth spreading through my chest. I focus harder, imagining the door swinging open, imagining freedom. I clench my fists, willing the magic—if it's there—to do something, to *work*. But nothing happens. The cell remains cold, unyielding, the door as solid and locked as ever. I grit my teeth and concentrate harder, my breath coming out in ragged gasps as I try to force the magic out of me, to push it into the stone, to feel it crack open the door.

But still, nothing. Not even a flicker.

For a moment, I stand there, staring at the door. And then, just for a second—a single, fleeting second—it feels real. The door clicks open with a soft, almost magical sound. My heart leaps in my chest, and I step forward, hope igniting in my veins.

But before I can even process it, a guard appears, his heavy boots echoing on the stone floor as he strides toward me. In one swift motion, he throws something at me. I flinch as it hits me, and I glance down to see a dress—a ball gown, black as night, laced with orange threads that shimmer like embers in the dim light.

"The Queen is throwing a ball. Get changed," the guard snaps, his voice sharp and hard, lacking any patience or kindness.

He tosses a mask next, and it clatters to the floor by my feet. "It's a masked ball," he adds, his tone dripping with cold authority, making it clear this isn't a request. "You have five minutes."

Chapter Twenty-Two

HOOK

THE GUARD'S grip on my arm is tight enough to bruise as we descend into the depths of the palace. Each step takes me further from my room—and my escape route. But I know exactly where we're headed. The ornate decor, the grand staircase, the increasing number of guards—it all screams 'ballroom'. And that's exactly where she'll be waiting.

The Queen. I might not know her personally, but I know her type. They crave the spectacle, the grand entrance. The attention. It's always about power with them, about making others feel small. Amateur hour, really.

The guard shoves open the towering doors with more force than necessary. Trying to intimidate me? Charming. The heavy wood groans, and the ballroom stretches out before us—all polished marble floors and crystal chandeliers dripping with heart-shaped prisms. The ceiling towers above, draped in dark silks that catch shadows from the flickering candlelight. Night of Shadows indeed. She's really embracing the whole 'evil queen' aesthetic.

And there she is, lounging on her throne like some pampered cat, all scarlet silk and dangerous curves. Her gown spills down the steps like fresh blood, her dark hair a curtain over her shoulders. The moment her eyes land on me, her lips curve into that wicked smile I've seen on a hundred faces before. Dangerous, yes—but predictable. She's playing a game, and I'm more than happy to dance.

“Captain Hook,” she purrs, voice dripping honey and venom. “I’m so glad you could join us.”

I step forward, giving my coat an exaggerated flourish. “Always a pleasure to receive such a royal invitation, Your Majesty.”

Her eyes rake over me, lingering just long enough to make her intentions clear. Let her look. Let her think she’s in control. They always do, these power-hungry types. Always think they’re the clever ones.

She rises from her throne with deliberate grace, each movement calculated for maximum effect. The hem of her gown whispers across marble as she descends, her gaze never leaving mine. Her hips sway as she approaches, and I have to admire the performance. She’s good—I’ll give her that.

“Such a fine suit they’ve given you.” Her fingers trail along my coat, teasing the edges. “It suits you perfectly.”

I let my smirk grow, adding just enough heat to my gaze. “Almost as if it was made for me.”

She steps closer, pressing against me. Her smile doesn’t reach her eyes. “Everything in my palace is tailored to perfection.”

Her hand slides up my chest, along my neck. Her breath is warm against my ear as she whispers, “Do you know why I gave you a room instead of the dungeon?” A soft laugh. “I could have, you know. Could’ve locked you in chains.” She sighs, breathy and practised. “I do love a man in chains.”

I tilt my head, letting my lips brush near hers without contact. “If you wanted me in chains, love, all you had to do was ask.”

Her laugh is soft, sultry—hiding something beneath the surface. She leans in closer, body flush against mine. Did she think I’d flinch? Please. I’ve danced with far more dangerous partners than her.

Her tongue traces the shell of my ear. “I could give you anything you wanted,” she murmurs. “Power, wealth, anything.”

I let out a low chuckle. “Oh, darling, you speak the music of my soul.”

She pulls back just enough to meet my eyes, her smile sharpening. There’s something darker there now, something deadly. “You and I are the same, but...” Her nails dig into my jaw, a reminder of who’s supposed to be in charge. “You’re not like the others, Captain. I like that about you.”

Her lips brush my neck, tongue tracing a slow path that’s meant to be seductive. She pulls back just enough that her breath warms my skin. “But

remember,” she whispers, voice a dangerous purr, “no matter how charming you think you are, you’re still in my palace. My kingdom.”

I meet her gaze with a lazy smile. “Wouldn’t dream of forgetting.”

She presses closer, hands sliding down to my waist. “You think you can outplay me?” Her lips ghost across mine, barely there. Her hand continues lower, cupping me through my trousers. “You think you’re in control here?”

I let the silence stretch, feeling the tension wind tighter. Then I lean in, matching her dangerous tone. “Oh, I know I’m not in control here, love.” Let her think she’s won. They always do right before they fall.

Her eyes flash—something primal, untamed. But she doesn’t pull away. No, she leans closer, breath hot against my skin. “Careful, Hook,” she purrs. “You might find yourself wanting more than you bargained for.”

I let my grin widen, feeling the game shift between us. “Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

She holds my gaze, lips parted like she might kiss me—or kill me. It’s always a fine line with women like her. Always reaching for power, always trying to dominate.

A sharp knock interrupts whatever she planned next. Her eyes snap to the door, annoyance flashing across her face. I can practically taste her irritation at being disrupted.

“Enter,” she snaps, voice sharp enough to cut.

The door creaks open. One of her guards steps in, face carefully blank as he bows his head. Smart man. He knows better than to meet her eyes.

“Yes?”

“The prisoners are being brought in,” he announces, gaze fixed on the floor.

The Queen straightens, satisfaction curling her lips into a cruel smile. “Good. Time for the real entertainment to begin.”

She turns back to me, eyes gleaming with dark promise. “Stay close, Captain.” Her fingers trail down my arm, lingering just long enough to make her point. “The night is just beginning.”

I watch her saunter away, hips swaying with deliberate grace. She thinks she’s got me wrapped around her finger, playing right into her hands. She has no idea what’s coming.

Chapter Twenty-Three

ALICE

THE CLINKING of metal echoes down the hallway, and I freeze, listening as gate after gate is thrown open, followed by muffled voices and the rustling of fabric. People are being given things—clothes, masks, and who knows what else. My heart pounds harder. This is happening. What the heck am I supposed to expect? I don't even dare ask.

From the cell beside mine, that familiar voice—soft but urgent—calls out. “Hurry,” she says. “Get dressed. Don’t make the Queen angry.”

I blink toward the heart-shaped hole, catching a glimpse of her porcelain face. “What’s going on?”

“The Queen’s games. Get dressed.”

I look down at the gown in my hands, the black fabric shimmering with orange threads like firelight flickering under the night sky. My fingers tremble as I hold it up. Every part of me wants to rebel, to throw the dress aside and refuse to play along. But I don’t. More gates open, and people are being dragged out. I’m out of time. Damn it. I scramble to peel off my hoodie and joggers, swapping them for the gown. Of course, it fits perfectly, as if it was made for me. They didn’t bother to give me shoes, though, so I’ll be wearing my trainers. Classy.

The mask feels heavy in my hands, but I bring it up to my face, securing it with delicate threads that wind into my hair. It’s too ornate, too fancy for someone like me, but that doesn’t matter here.

Before I can gather my thoughts, the gate to my cell swings open with a loud creak. Two guards appear, their faces expressionless beneath their helmets. I barely have time to adjust the mask before they grab me roughly by the arm and haul me out.

They're not gentle. I stumble slightly as we walk, and they open the next cell, then the next. The Hare is behind me. The porcelain doll girl comes out in front, and she's practically thrown at me. I catch her.

"Thanks," she says in a small voice, her wide porcelain eyes blinking up at me. "I'm Rosie." She thrusts her cold, solid hand into mine, and just as she does, the guards jab us forward.

"No talking. More walking," one of the guards barks, his voice sharp and harsh.

"Alice," I say quickly, though she clearly already knows.

We're all pulled from our cells—a sea of dresses, suits, and masks, each more elaborate and bizarre than the next. Everyone is dressed up for this twisted masquerade. She's not the only doll, but Rosie is the only one intact. Further down the row, they drag out a boy made of porcelain too, but he's cracked, his face and cheeks painted a glossy, unnatural red. He struggles, and as he stumbles, his foot—broken and hollow—clinks against the stone floor. The others catch him, but his movement is awkward, his shattered foot leaving him hobbling along.

We're herded together, like cattle, all of us moving as one mass toward the grand double doors at the end of the hall. Just as we approach, the doors are flung open, revealing a room so bright and opulent it nearly blinds me after the gloom of the cells.

The ballroom is massive. Crystal chandeliers hang from the ceiling, casting a warm golden glow over everything. But this isn't some elegant ballroom for a fairy tale—it's like Wonderland collided with Halloween. The walls are draped in spider silk curtains, and pumpkins carved with twisted faces line the edges of the room. Heart-shaped banners—painted blood-red—hang from the ceiling, blending in with garlands made of black roses and bones. Mirrors tower along the walls, reflecting the eerie, grotesque figures of all the people dragged here for this macabre event.

My heart clenches when I take it all in. There are far more prisoners than Rosie guessed. So many masks. So many lives pulled into this twisted game.

We're shoved into the centre of the room, where a long line of chairs is arranged back-to-back in an oblong shape. The guards push us down into the seats, and I find myself sitting on a cold, hard surface, my back pressed to the person behind me. It's suffocating, being so close to so many strangers, none of us knowing what's about to happen.

And then I see her.

The Queen.

She's perched high on her throne, draped in crimson, her dark hair cascading down over her shoulders like a waterfall of ink. Her sharp eyes gleam as she surveys the room, and a slow, satisfied smile spreads across her face. She takes in the sight of us—all of us trapped, powerless, dressed up for her twisted party.

But just as my eyes drift from her, something else—or someone else—catches my attention. He's standing near the back of the ballroom, away from the crowd, and somehow, without even trying, he owns the space around him. His posture is relaxed, but there's a dangerous energy in the way he holds himself. The dim light catches the edges of his sharp features, the hard line of his jaw, and the shadow of a smirk tugging at his lips.

He's tall, powerful-looking, and every movement he makes feels deliberate—like he's been here before and he knows exactly what game he's playing. His dark eyes flick over the room, but then—just for a moment—they lock onto mine. My breath catches in my throat. There's something in the way he looks at me, like he's sizing me up, like he's already figured me out.

Attractive? Yes. Dangerous? Absolutely.

I don't know who he is, but somehow, I get the feeling that whoever he is, he's not someone you'd want to be on the wrong side of.

And I can't shake the feeling that he's watching me, waiting. For what, though? I'm not sure I want to find out.

The Queen's voice cuts through the room, and I'm forced to tear my eyes away from him.

But even as I sit here, I can still feel his eyes on me, lingering. Watching.

Waiting.

Chapter Twenty-Four

HOOK

THE BALLROOM IS CLOAKED in an eerie stillness as every one of the Queen's prisoners are brought in and made to sit on the ridiculous chairs lined up in the centre. She's dressed them all in fine attire, and to anyone looking in, it might seem like they're attending a grand ball. But there's nothing elegant about this scene. They sit back to back, stiff and uneasy, as the Queen lounges on her throne, pretending to be bored. But I see it—the glint in her eyes, the sharp edge of anticipation. She's been waiting for this moment. Her gaze gleams with twisted satisfaction.

The room holds its breath. Every person here—the guards, the prisoners—is part of the Queen's performance, waiting on edge for the cue.

Her voice cuts through the silence, low and commanding. "Welcome to the Night of Shadows," she says, her eyes sweeping over the room like a predator surveying her prey.

I lean against a pillar, casually watching. It's not hard to guess where this is heading. The Queen thrives on theatrics, and there's nothing she loves more than watching people squirm. She's cruel, wicked, and predictable. But I'm not here to play her games. I'm waiting for my moment—the amulet is here, I'm certain of it.

It's not on her; though, I would've felt it when she stood too bloody close. That familiar pulse of Neverland's magic is like a thread pulling at the back of my mind, teasing me. I just need to find it.

But then something else pulls my attention.

There.

I stand a little straighter.

The girl from the mirror.

Her blonde hair is tucked behind a delicate black mask, her gown clinging to her in all the right places—fitting her like it was made for her, just like mine. She doesn't belong here, not at all, and yet... there's something about the way she holds herself. Something that makes her look like she might belong here after all. She just doesn't know it yet.

That's the thing about her.

The Queen's voice drones on in the background, but I've lost interest in whatever pompous rubbish she's spouting. My focus is entirely on the woman across the room. I saw her in that mirror, just a glimpse, but she was angry, defiant. Seeing her in person is... different. She's more striking than I expected, and there's a fire in her eyes that sets something alight in me.

She moves cautiously, her gaze darting around the room like she's trying to make sense of this madness. Her fingers grip the edges of her gown, her posture stiff with unease. The mask hides part of her face, but it doesn't cover the uncertainty in her eyes—or the way she bites her bottom lip, like she's trying to hold herself together.

I shift, keeping myself in the shadows, watching her. She doesn't know I'm here—not yet—but I can't deny the way my chest tightens when I look at her. It's not just her beauty, though that certainly doesn't hurt. There's something more. Something... deeper.

Her eyes sweep the room again, and then—just for a moment—they lock onto mine.

There it is.

The spark.

She looks away quickly, but I know she's seen me. I feel it. Because a moment later, she looks again, and I suck in a breath. My pulse kicks up, and I'm not even sure why. My heart's supposed to beat for the amulet, not her. But she's got my attention now. And as she turns her gaze back to the Queen, I'm still watching her.

The Queen rises from her throne, offering her hand to her captain, who rushes to her side like a loyal dog. He takes her hand, helping her down the steps. She's heading towards the woman. With a flick of her head, two

guards approach from either side, moving towards the prisoners, but the Queen raises her hand, stopping them.

And then two idiots lean into each other. I can't hear what they say, but words pass between them.

The Queen lets go of her captain and strides toward the two prisoners, her eyes narrowing with cold disdain.

One of them sits straighter, whispering to the other, their voices soft, but not soft enough.

"Did I give you permission to speak?" the Queen's voice slices through the tension, sharp and unforgiving.

One of the prisoners is a young lad, barely out of his teens. His suit's too big, his eyes wide with fear. Dark hair falls messily around his face, sweat glistening on his forehead. He tries to sit up straighter, like sitting properly will somehow save him from the Queen's wrath.

Next to him is a woman, older, with streaks of grey threading through what was once thick, black hair. Her gown, while beautiful, is torn at the hem, as though she's had to fight for every inch of dignity. She looks like someone who's seen better days—maybe even someone who's fought her way through worse than this. But despite the hardness in her eyes, there's a flicker of fear she can't quite hide.

Neither of them speak now, but their nervous glances betray them.

"Answer me," the Queen's voice rings out, sharp and furious, the kind of yell that cuts through bone. When they don't, the Queen's eyes narrow into cold slits, her voice dropping, low and dangerous. "Off with their heads," she commands.

"No. No Please."

"Don't. We didn't ..."

They spit out their apologies, sink back as if they might change the Queen's mind, but a real ruler would not back down. That would be a weakness.

She doesn't, even as their pleas grow louder.

The guards move swiftly, spears raised, ready to strike. The young man's eyes widen in terror, and the older woman beside him stiffens, the flicker of fear in her gaze betraying the tough exterior she's tried to hold on to.

Before they can move, before the guards can do anything, a voice rings out, cutting through the tension.

“No.”

It’s her. The woman. She shoots up from her seat, her voice strong, but there’s a tremor in it. Before she can even take a breath, the guards are on her, spears pointed at her chest. It happens so fast, I barely have time to process it.

The woman stands.

I straighten without thinking, my spine snapping upright as I watch the scene unfold. My breath catches in my throat.

Damn it, what the hell is she doing?

The Queen raises an eyebrow, eyes gleaming with twisted amusement as she takes her time. “Alice, dear,” she says, her voice mockingly sweet, oozing with condescension. “Are we having a problem?”

The woman--Alice, hesitates, but she doesn’t back down. No, she holds her ground, chin high, shoulders squared. “You can’t just cut off someone’s head because they spoke.”

A slow, cruel smile spreads across the Queen’s lips, and I feel a knot twist in my gut. “I’m the Queen. I can do whatever I want.” She steps toward Alice, the room falling into a tense silence as she closes the space between them. “Shall I cut off your head instead?” she asks. “Would you like to take their place?”

Alice doesn’t flinch.

Sit down you fool.

I don’t know why, but something in me tightens. I shift, my eyes locked on her, my chest tight as hell. I’m here for the amulet, I remind myself. Not her. Not this. Not anyone. But damn if I don’t feel the pull, stronger than I want to admit.

My mother’s bleeding heart beats in my chest somewhere.

The Queen’s gaze lingers on Alice, her smile deepening, eyes glinting with dark satisfaction. And then, with a flick of her wrist, she dismisses the moment. “Carry on,” she says coldly.

The guards move forward, their spears raised once again. The prisoners’ fate is sealed, but it’s Alice who lingers in my mind. Her defiance, her fire... it’s dangerous. It’s reckless. And I can’t tear my bloody eyes away.

Chapter Twenty-Five

ALICE

MY INSIDES ARE TREMBLING, my hands shaking at my sides as I clench them into fists. The Queen's eyes are on me, studying every twitch, every flinch, as if she's savouring my reaction. Her lips twist into that sickly smile, the one I thought I'd left in the past. But she's watching me, drinking it all in.

The guards don't even bother taking the man and woman out of the room; they haul them off to the side like they're just props in her twisted game. The man starts shouting, struggling against them, but it's no use—too many guards, too many hands. In a flash, they've got him slammed to the floor. My eyes flick over to the block, its surface dark-stained, with a large bucket beneath it. This is her chopping block. And she loves it.

They push the woman forward, forcing her to lean over, her head resting on the cold, stained wood. She's silent, resigned, but I can feel her fear, a terrible, pulsing thing that crawls into my own skin. The executioner raises his blade high.

You don't have to do this. The words are right there, burning on my tongue. But I hold them back. She wants this. Any protest from me would only make it worse, give her even more of the reaction she's craving.

I turn, keeping my eyes on her instead, and she's delighted, practically glowing. My chest tightens as a sickening *thump* fills the air, the wet sound of steel hitting flesh, followed by the thud of something falling into the bucket.

The man is screaming now. They left him for second on purpose—so he'd have to watch. Something cold slithers through my veins, ice and dread twisting in my gut. I swallow down the bile clawing its way up my throat. I will not gag. I will not give her the satisfaction. I refuse to even look his way. The blade comes down fast, silencing his protests in a brutal, final thud.

I stare at the Queen instead. Her gaze flicks to mine, pleased, mocking, before she steps back. She's not backing away from me—no, she's simply finished her show, and now she's savouring the effect. Her eyes go over each of us, taking in the quiet, horrified silence. And for just a moment, she holds my gaze, daring me to defy her. I consider it, just for a second, feel a pulse of anger as if I might stand, storm up to her. But that's exactly what she wants. This is her game.

After a beat, she begins to circle us, her guards moving in rhythm around her, her gown swishing smoothly along the marbled floor. "Does anyone else love party games as much as I?" she announces, but the room is thick with silence. "No one?" She pauses, turning in a grand swirl of crimson as she raises an eyebrow. Her finger jabs towards one of her guards. "Thorin. Do you like party games?"

He gives a measured nod. "I do, Your Majesty," he replies, bowing as he speaks, though his words lack any real enthusiasm.

She nods, almost delighted, and gives him a thoughtful smile. "Me too. What's your favourite?"

A frown flickers on his face, but he quickly schools his expression back to that stoic readiness for orders, his posture stiff and unmoving.

When he doesn't respond, she strides over to him, circling him like a vulture. "Come now, Thorin, don't be shy. Surely, as a child, you attended parties, yes?"

"Yes, your majesty."

"And you played party games?"

"We did."

"And what game would be your favourite?"

Thorin hesitates, just for a beat, like he's considering his next words carefully. For a moment, I swear I can hear his heartbeat echoing in the silence, as if he's weighing each word against her wrath. Then, almost too quietly, he says, "Musical chairs, Your Majesty."

“Oh.” Her eyes light up, scanning the room as though she’s already planning the next spectacle. She claps her hands, grinning with delight. “Oh, yes. Yes. Let’s have some music.”

The musicians are hidden somewhere in the shadows, but the eerie, almost surreal melody fills the air instantly, echoing around the room with an unsettling energy. It’s not a cheery party tune—it’s something haunting and alive, perfectly fitting for the Queen.

The Queen’s smile widens, but there’s nothing warm about it. Her gaze moves slowly across the room, lingering on each of us in turn, before she swirls back toward her throne. She raises her arms, as if casting a spell over us all, and the very air thickens, humming with a dark, electric energy. The music grows louder.

“Now, my darlings,” she purrs. “We’ll start with a little warm-up.” She sweeps her gaze over the room, her eyes glinting. The guards slip back into the shadows, disappearing along the edges of the room like ghosts.

My gut twists as the ballroom lights dim, casting long, eerie shadows that slink across the floor. The Queen raises her hands again, her fingers seeming to pull at the shadows like puppets, bending them to her will.

“Shadows,” she says, her voice almost sweet. “They can do such... wonderful things. They reveal, they obscure... they remind us of our own darkness. And tonight, they’ll help me see what you’re all really made of.”

Around me, the other prisoners shift uneasily, glancing at each other in silent fear. The air is thick with it. Even my own nerves feel tight and frayed. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch sight of the man from before—the one standing by the pillar, the one who’d looked at me. His gaze flickers back to me, and something strange flutters in my stomach.

The Queen’s voice snaps me back to reality. “This is how it works, my little darlings,” she says, dragging out each word with a wicked smile. “When the shadows find you, you will dance. If you fight, well... it will hurt.”

The shadows around us begin to thicken, swirling and pooling at our feet. “Dance with your shadow,” she croons, her voice lilting. “Or let it devour you.”

I barely have time to process her words before the shadows start creeping up my legs, cool and whispering against my skin. In seconds, they’re pulling me forward, forcing me to move in a slow, unnatural rhythm. My legs respond without my permission, each step stiff and

jarring. It's not a dance of joy—it's more like being dragged, every motion twisted and wrong.

"It's all a game. Just a game," I whisper to myself, trying to hold onto a shred of control. But the shadows tighten around me, winding around my legs and waist like vines, binding me to their dance. There's a faint hiss in my ear, a taunting whisper I can't quite understand, but I don't need to. This dance isn't an invitation—it's an order.

Around me, the other prisoners stumble in the same unnatural rhythm, jerking and staggering under the Queen's gaze. I catch sight of the porcelain girl from the cell next to mine. Her face is tight with fear as she fights each step, her feet moving against her will. Beside her, a young man is trembling, his wide eyes filled with terror as he's pulled into his dance.

I bite down on my lip, the sharp pain grounding me. Maybe if I can focus, I can keep a hold of myself. But the shadows only tighten, winding around my arms and pulling me forward, forcing me into a sweeping motion that spins me in a slow, controlled circle.

The Queen's laughter rises above the music, high and cruel. She's watching us, entertained. We're nothing more than toys she's wound up to play with. This isn't a party—it's a show, a game for her to enjoy.

"Move with the shadows," the Queen croons, her gaze sweeping across the room until it settles on him. My heart lurches. "Oh, come now, Hook," she calls, a dangerous smile curling her lips. "Are you not joining us? Do you not want to dance with your own darkness? I know it's there."

Hook. Captain Hook? No freaking way.

I try to make sense of that. No. It can't be. I ... I have to be dreaming. I have to be. There's no other explanation for this. But he's standing there, as real as the rest of us. There's something different about him. Something almost... defiant.

"I'm not much of a dancer," he says, his tone casual, almost bored, but he strides toward her anyway, pushing through us as if the shadows are nothing more than fog. They seem to part for him, slipping away like they know better than to touch him. He reaches the Queen and bows, an easy smirk on his lips, offering her his hand. "Perhaps you and I could have this dance instead."

The Queen's lips curl into a smile, one that's equal parts sweet and lethal. "Oh, you flatter me," she purrs, her eyes alight with something dangerous.

Hook doesn't back away, just tilts his head with a grin still in place.
"As only you deserve. Shall we dance?"

Chapter Twenty-Six

HOOK

THE QUEEN'S hands are like ice, her fingers curling around mine with a grip that could freeze the sea. She steps closer, all deadly grace and wicked smiles, her gaze as sharp as the edge of her blade. Around us, her twisted game unfolds—the shadows tighten their grip on the prisoners, forcing them into stiff, stumbling dances, like broken puppets on strings.

I let her pull me deeper into a waltz, but keep my focus razor-sharp. I just need to be close enough to feel any flicker of the amulet's magic. It *has* to be here—she wouldn't leave that kind of power far from her reach.

You did, snaps a voice in my head. *We did*. Right.

That's how she got the bloody thing in the first place—because it was out of our sight. Out of Peter's sight. And now here I am, dancing with a monster, and still, I feel nothing. Not a flicker, not the faintest pulse of magic. Either she's hidden it well, or it's not here at all.

"Oh, Hook," she purrs, leaning in, her breath brushing my ear. Her arm snakes around my waist, and her other hand fits perfectly into mine, as if this were a dance of romance instead of power. "Such tension. Relax, darling—you might actually enjoy yourself."

"Oh, I'm having the time of my life, love," I say, giving her a lazy smile. But I can't seem to keep my gaze on her. As much as I know I should, it keeps slipping left, back to her—Alice.

She's right there in the centre of the ballroom, her limbs dragged forward and back by those cursed shadows. Every step is a struggle, stiff

and reluctant, she's fighting the magic pulling her. And even from here, I can tell—this isn't Neverland's magic. I know its hum, its particular thrum. Neverland's magic is alive, a bit wild, a bit untamed. But Wonderland's? This place reeks of something else entirely—dark, numb, like a spell gone stale. Used and broken, with a sourness that gets under your skin.

Where is that bloody amulet?

I look at Alice, her eyes blazing even as she's forced through this dance. She fights it, in her own way. And with her, there's a flicker of something else—something that doesn't fit in Wonderland's twisted picture.

"Something catching your eye, Captain?" the Queen's voice cuts through my thoughts. She's followed my gaze, of course, before I can snap it back. "Oh, our dear Alice. Quite the intriguing little creature, isn't she?"

I shrug, tearing my gaze from her and fixing it back on the Queen. "Intriguing enough, I suppose. Though I wouldn't say I've got much of a taste for naïve girls from the Hollowlands. But I was curious why you might?"

The Queen lets out a low, mocking laugh. "Oh, Hook, no games. Please. Don't insult me—I see you watching her."

I scoff lightly, pulling her closer, all charm. "The only thing I'm watching, love, is you." I give her a pointed, lingering smile.

"So charming." Her eyes narrow with that cruel gleam. "Poor little Alice don't you think? She's not like us. She doesn't know when to submit."

"Submission's overrated," I reply smoothly, giving the Queen a slow spin that throws her slightly off balance. "Wouldn't you agree?"

She chuckles, her nails digging into my shoulder a little harder. "Only the foolish fight against the inevitable."

"Is that so?" I guide her into another turn, but my eyes flick back to Alice. She's still fighting, even if it's just with her eyes—steady, unyielding, blazing with a defiance that's rare in this world. And damn if something in me doesn't find it irresistible.

"You're curious about her."

I give a careless shrug. "I enjoy a good mystery. Which, of course, is why I came here—for your aid."

The Queen's fingers trail along my jaw, forcing my gaze back to her. "Mysteries are poison, Hook. Intoxicating, but eventually, they destroy you." She leans in, her voice a murmur against my ear. "But if it's a mystery you crave, I can assure you, I'm more than capable of keeping you entertained."

I meet her gaze with a roguish grin, tilting my head just enough to let her think I'm buying into her game. "Oh, I don't doubt that."

She pulls back, smirking, clearly thinking she's got me wrapped around her finger. But as we turn, her gaze flickers back to Alice, a dark glint in her eyes. A warning, perhaps. Or just a reminder that this game is hers to control.

The music shifts, slowing, and the Queen steps away, her hand lingering in mine a moment longer. "Enjoy the rest of your night, Captain," she purrs, a promise and threat wrapped in one. Then she strides off, addressing the room once more. The moment she speaks, everything stops.

"Time for a new game," she declares, eyes gleaming. "Thorin, remove a chair. We'll play your game now."

The shadows slink back, and everyone is left standing in crooked, breathless silence.

"The rules are simple," she says, her voice carrying a wicked lilt. "When the music stops, you find a chair. The one who fails..." She grins, wide and gleaming. "Off with their heads."

I glance back to Alice. She's panting from the dance, shooting a glare at the shadows as they slink away, her face set and her gaze locked on the Queen. Clearly, her mind's racing through a hundred thoughts. And this... this is about to get very interesting.

And, if I'm honest, I can't wait to see just how far she'll go.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

ALICE

THE BALLROOM IS SILENT, save for the muffled shuffling of my fellow prisoners, all lined up now, chairs abandoned, every one of us on edge. The shadows have receded, yet a dark, uneasy air lingers, thick. I keep my gaze on the Queen. She's revelling in this. Exactly as I remember, though somehow worse—or maybe it's just me that's different. The girl I was feels a lifetime away. She was brave and strong, curious in a way that seems almost reckless to me now.

Curiouser and curiouser.

The words sit on my lips and echo somewhere in my heart, though this time, they're tinged with fear. Was I really brave then? Or just foolish? A girl with no sense of danger, no thought of death—because, as a child, you think you're invincible, that nothing can truly hurt you. Death was something that happens in stories. Back then, I felt like I would live forever.

The music starts low, a slow, quiet hum vibrating around the room, filling every corner with an ominous energy. The Queen steps forward, chin lifted high, her head nodding with a terrible, triumphant gleam in her eyes. She claps her hands, each clap ringing out like a command. "Let the fun begin," she purrs, voice dripping with wicked delight.

At first, none of us move, frozen under the weight of her power—or perhaps it's fear that roots us in place. She raises a brow, the hint of a smirk tugging at her lips. "Well? Are you all dimwitted? Move. You know

how to play." Her hands twist through the air in some silent, impatient instruction, and that's all it takes. We begin to shuffle in an anti-clockwise direction, eyes darting to each other and then back to the chairs, tense and alert, as though we could somehow know which one will be removed next.

A guard steps forward, plucking a chair from the line-up and carrying it away with almost casual disdain. The music picks up, a haunting, dissonant melody that seeps under my skin, clawing at my nerves. I grit my teeth and step in time with the others, circling, watching, waiting. We're all coiled tight, like springs ready to snap.

Then, the Queen raises her hand—a silent command. Everyone's eyes shoot to her, searching for any hint, any signal, that might give us an advantage. The music cuts out abruptly, and panic jolts through me as the room erupts. Bodies lunge for the chairs, people pushing, pulling, clawing their way forward. There's no decorum here, no mercy—only survival.

A young man with wild, terrified eyes stumbles a second too late. Thorin closes in without hesitation, grabbing him roughly and dragging him to the chopping block.

"Off with his head," The Queen's voice rings out, loud and gleeful, as though this is merely an entertaining pastime.

The young man struggles, a desperate yell ripping from his throat, but no one moves to help. No one dares. The guards are a wall of indifference, as if he's nothing more than a pile of dirty washing to be dealt with. The executioner raises his blade, a flash of steel catching the light, and then—*thud*. Blood splatters across the marble, pooling around the base of the block.

I bite down hard on the inside of my cheek, forcing myself not to look away. The guards step forward, hauling away the man's limp body, leaving only a thick, dark stain behind. The music kicks back in, and we're all jolted into motion, resuming our macabre dance around the chairs. But my gaze clings to the body being dragged off, horror and something else creeping in. Just as they reach the edge of the room, I catch a strange glint—a faint glow drifting up from his body, streaming towards the Queen.

What the hell is that? Do I imagine it?

No. The Queen inhales deeply, eyes fluttering shut for a brief, almost indulgent moment, as if she's savouring it. And the others, too busy scrambling for survival, don't seem to notice. But I do. And as her eyes

snap open, sharper and brighter than before, it's clear—the poor man's life just... *fed* her.

The shadows around us, the ones that seemed to dance with us before, now swirl more visibly across the floor, dark and sinuous. I rub my eyes, maybe exhaustion. I've got to be seeing things. But the Queen's gaze lands on me. My stomach twists, but I refuse to let her see me falter. Instead, I let my gaze drift—naturally, I find Hook. He's standing across the room, calm but intense, with something dark in his eyes. He saw it too. And unlike the others, he doesn't look away.

The music starts again, relentless. A guard removes another chair. Around and around we go, lambs walking towards the butcher. My pulse pounds with the rhythm, my steps mechanical, each one dragging me closer to the edge. My breath catches, shallow and tight.

Then, the music cuts out. I lunge for the nearest chair, managing to grab it without hesitation. But to my left, a middle-aged woman falters, her greying hair hanging loose as she stands, frozen, for half a second too long. The guards seize her, her face a mask of resignation as they drag her towards the chopping block. She doesn't scream, doesn't plead—she just stares, her silence a haunting surrender.

The game goes on, pitiless as the Queen's smile grows sharper. Her voice booms across the room. "Off with her head."

The blade falls again, and I catch that faint shimmer—a pull of shadows and light, drifting towards the Queen. She inhales it, her skin seeming to gain colour, a touch of vitality. But no one notices again. Everyone's too numb, too focused on survival to pick up on it. She's broken them down to exactly what she wants—quiet, stunned, and helpless.

My fists clench as a quiet fury builds within me. Is she *feeding* off them? Fueling her magic with their lives? But why?

I force myself to keep my steps steady, not wanting to give anything away, even as dread gnaws at my bones. Around me, others are barely holding it together, their expressions pale and terrified, some on the verge of breaking entirely. I catch sight of Hook, moving through the crowd with an almost lazy grace, like none of this touches him. But when our eyes meet, there's a look in his—a hint of something that feels almost like reassurance. It throws me. Hook is dangerous, every bit the ruthless pirate of fairy tales, but this... it's unsettling.

The music stops abruptly, and another prisoner is seized. A boy, barely out of his teens, stands there, wide-eyed but silent as they drag him to the block. I grit my teeth as the blade falls, and the Queen all but shivers, drinking in his life with her eyes half-closed in satisfaction.

Does no one else see it?

I want to scream, to call her out, but what good would it do? She'd only laugh, relishing in my misery as much as the others'. I glance at Hook again, my gaze catching his. He's watching me, his expression unreadable behind his mask, but there's a gleam in those dangerous eyes I can't quite place.

Another round, another prisoner lost. The woman next to me trembles, barely holding herself together as she scrambles for a chair. It's becoming too much. The air is thick with fear, shadows clinging to us, feeding on our terror, just as the Queen feasts on their lives. I'm sure of it.

I hold my ground, forcing down the nausea that rises each time I catch her twisted smile. With each body that piles up, I feel myself weakening, every part of me screaming to get out of here.

The music stops once more, and I barely make it to a chair in time. My heart hammers as I watch yet another prisoner fall. The blade swings down, the Queen takes another life.

No, no. Stop it. God.

They're not real. This is not real. Just a dream. A dream and in a moment, I'll wake up.

The music stops. A chair is taken.

Rosie. Oh, god. "Rosie ..."

Her gaze meets mine. The guards sweep in.

"Leave her alone." I don't care about the rules anymore, don't care about the Queen or her twisted game. I break out of line, shoving past a few trembling prisoners to get to her. Rosie's eyes meet mine, wide and pleading, as one guard clamps his hand on her arm, dragging her towards the block.

"Get your hands off her." My voice is raw, shaking with a rage that's stronger than any fear I feel right now. I lunge for the guard's arm, fingers digging in, but he doesn't even flinch. Instead, he spins, forcing me back with a shove. I stumble but keep my footing.

I lunge at him, my fists flying, desperate, rage boiling over. My hands connect with cold metal and unyielding armour, but I don't care. All I can

see is Rosie's wide, frightened eyes, her tiny porcelain hand reaching for mine.

"Let her go," I scream, twisting out of a guard's grip and shoving at the one dragging Rosie. "You don't have to do this. Take me. Take me instead."

One of them grabs my arm, twisting it painfully behind me. I twist, my other hand clawing, my voice raw and wild, "I said, let her go."

"Alice."

His voice is low and steady, right behind me, but I ignore him, my eyes fixed on Rosie's face, pale and cracked, her lips trembling. Another guard grabs me, and I shove them back, my strength waning, but my rage keeping me on my feet.

"Alice," he says again, sharper this time. It's not a guard. It's Hook. Hook's pulling me back, yanking me out of the guards' hold with one powerful tug. I whirl on him, thrashing against his grip, my voice hoarse with rage. "Let me go, damn you."

"Alice, enough." His voice is like steel, hard and unforgiving, but I'm too far gone to care.

"You don't understand." I shout, trying to twist free, but his arms only tighten around me, locking me in place. I kick, struggle, throwing everything I have against him, but he's a wall, solid and unyielding. "Let me go. She doesn't deserve this. Let me—"

"Alice," he growls, his grip like iron. "Stop. Look at her."

But I can't. I can't bear to. My throat closes as I catch Rosie's face, her broken gaze locked onto mine. Tears blur my vision, but I keep fighting, trying to claw my way free. "She needs me. You don't understand."

His hold on me tightens further, his voice a rough whisper against my ear, filled with something that's almost... pity. "It's too late, Alice. You'll only get yourself killed."

But I'm beyond reason, thrashing like a wild animal in his grip, my fists pounding against his chest. "I don't care." I scream, my voice a cracked, desperate sound. "You coward, let me go. Let me go."

"Stop fighting me, love, or you'll end up on that block yourself." His voice is harsh, edged with something cold and unyielding. He holds me tighter, his body a wall against the guards, shielding me as I crumble. "Stop. It's over."

“No. No, it’s not.” I twist in his arms, my voice breaking. “She doesn’t deserve this, Hook, she doesn’t—”

But his hands hold me firm, his face close to mine, his eyes burning into me, and for a second, everything goes silent. “Alice,” he murmurs, voice low, “she’s gone.”

And then, the thud. That horrible, final sound, the kind that sticks in your chest and twists. The whole room seems to go cold. The Queen’s laughter echoes, cruel and triumphant, as Rosie’s small, fragile body slumps forward, lifeless. Hook’s grip loosens just enough for me to see it, to watch as her light drains, her once-bright, porcelain skin now dull and cracked.

I go limp in Hook’s arms, my strength gone, my voice a whisper. “You should have let me go,” I murmur, hollow and broken.

But he doesn’t release me, his grip steady and sure, as if he knows I’d collapse if he did. He just holds me “And then you’d die too.”

The Queen descends the steps slowly, each clap echoing through the room, a sound that grates against my already frayed nerves. She stops just a few paces in front of us, her mouth twisted into that triumphant, poisonous smile. “Well done, Captain,” she purrs. “You’ve saved us all from yet another... disruption.” Her eyes flick to me, gleaming with cruel amusement. “Quite the hero, aren’t you?”

My chest tightens, and I push against Hook’s arm, needing distance from him. Tears blur my vision as I struggle to swallow the bitter taste of betrayal. “You’re no better than her,” I hiss, low enough so only he can hear. “Coward.”

Hook’s expression flickers, but he says nothing. Instead, he takes a single step back, his gaze unreadable. The guard shoves me back into line, his grip unforgiving. I can’t take my eyes off Hook, anger bubbling through my blood, every part of me wanting to scream, to fight. But I’m trapped, and there’s nowhere left to go.

The Queen steps closer, her gaze lingering on the tears still wet on my cheeks. “What a lovely display of loyalty. Truly touching,” she croons, her tone mocking, delighting in every flicker of anguish I can’t quite hide. “But this is no time for sentiment. The game must go on.”

The guards close ranks around us, their faces blank. The Queen’s lips curve into a smile as she claps her hands again, and everything begins again.

I can feel her gaze, dark and greedy, a hunger that fills the room. She's savouring every second. Hook isn't so far away from her. I hate her. I hate them both. Rosie didn't have to die.

As we circle again, people steal glances at the queen, watching her movements. She's raising her hand, chin tilted as she watches us, a few chairs fewer now, just over ten of us left. The guards remove another chair, and her lips curl into a satisfied smile. She twists her fingers, but this time she doesn't stop the music. No, she's noticed them watching, noticed their desperation for a sign, a tell.

Then, a woman—she's in her thirties, hair neatly tied back, wearing a slender, delicate gown—panics. She makes a sudden dash for a chair, sitting down with a fearful jolt.

The Queen's eyes flash. She slices her hand through the air. "Stop," she commands, but it's not to halt the music. She descends the steps, her movements slow, deliberate. "Did I say the music had stopped?" she asks.

The woman tries to stand, to scramble up, but a guard is already there, gripping her shoulder, pinning her down.

"Did I stop the music?" the Queen repeats.

The woman's lip trembles as she stammers, "I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I didn't mean..."

The Queen leans in. "Did I permit you to speak?"

The woman shakes her head, pressing her lips together, trying to hold back, but the tears and snot mingling on her face betray her fear. The Queen's grin sharpens. I know exactly what she's about to do.

"Off with her head," she orders.

"No. Please, I'm sorry," the woman begs, scrambling, her desperation clawing at my chest, making it hard not to react.

"Do you have to be so petty?"

Silence drops like a weight, and the Queen's gaze swings to me, her eyes narrowing. "Alice. Always Alice." She breathes in slowly. "I could take you to the block, you know, remove your head too," and for a moment, I think she might actually do it—drag me to the block and be done with it.

"Remove my head, then, if that's what you want," I say, forcing myself to meet her gaze, refusing to give her the satisfaction of seeing me flinch.

Her lips curl into a smile, something dark flashing in her eyes—annoyance, maybe, or curiosity. Instead of punishing me, she pulls back,

surveying me with a calculating look. “Let’s make this more interesting,” she announces.

Everyone around us freezes, breaths shallow, eyes darting between me, the Queen, and the guards. But the Queen isn’t looking at them. “Bring him forward.”

Two guards step from the shadows, grabbing Hook by the arms. He doesn’t resist, though he could, easily. Instead, he lets them pull him forward, his swagger in place.

The Queen, lounging on her throne, tilts her head, smiling in a way that makes my stomach twist. “Kneel,” she commands.

Hook hesitates for the briefest second before giving her an exaggerated bow, letting one knee hit the floor. “Your Majesty,” he murmur.

The Queen’s smile widens, cold and biting. “You came to me seeking assistance, didn’t you, Captain? Hoping I’d lend you a fraction of my power to revive that magic-starved wasteland of yours?”

“I did,” he replies. “But I admit, I rather enjoy the company of a powerful woman.” He raises an eyebrow, his expression unreadable as he holds her gaze.

The Queen’s eyes narrow. “Flattery might charm others, but I am not so easily swayed.” She leans forward, her voice dropping to a low, icy pitch. “If you want my help, you’ll have to earn it.”

Hook tilts his head, his smile sly. “Then I’ll win this, just for you.”

“Indeed.” She rises slowly, gaze locked on his. “Play my game of chairs, Captain. Dance to the music with your precious life on the line. Show me what you’re willing to risk.” She leans close, her voice barely above a whisper. “If you survive, then we’ll discuss your request. If you lose... well, I think you know what happens.”

Hook doesn’t falter, though something dark flashes in his eyes. “You know me, love,” he says, standing, brushing himself off with a casual confidence. “I’m always up for a challenge.”

The Queen’s smile is pure malice. “Then prove yourself.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

HOOK

I SLIP into the circle with ease, throwing the Queen a roguish grin as I join her little parade of masked prisoners. Her attempt to make me dance like one of her puppets? Adorable. She should know better—I've been playing these games long before she perched that crown on her head. Her sense of control is nothing more than a fleeting illusion, one I'll shatter when the time is right. When I have my amulet.

Alice's gaze is practically burning a hole through me, her cheeks flushed, eyes ablaze, hating me with every fibre of her being. I'm not sorry for holding her back. I'd do it again without hesitation. That doll was going to die, no matter what Alice said or did. The Queen had already made her choice, and I'm no fool to die a hero. Sacrifice is for fools. Besides, Alice doesn't see it yet, but she's more than some bleeding heart. She's the key.

She keeps scowling at me, lips pressed tight, a million unspoken curses simmering in her gaze. *Keep fuming, love. I did you a favour, even if you'll never admit it.*

The music starts, and I roll my shoulders, flexing my fingers as I take in the scene. The masks, the gowns, the guards lurking in every shadow. It's all for show. The Queen's particular brand of cruelty might be grand, but it's predictable. Every move carefully designed to entertain her twisted desires.

My first round ends quickly. Some poor bastard misses his chair, and the guards waste no time dragging him off. The Queen can't resist delivering her favourite line, either. "Off with his head." The wet thud of the blade follows, accompanied by her satisfied smile. But Alice? She looks away, squeezing her eyes shut, a grimace twisting her mouth as the sound fills the room. She's not the only one, either. A few of the others are red-eyed and wet-faced, their tears pooling on the marble as they shuffle around.

But it's the shadows that catch my eye. They're moving differently now, swirling across the floor with purpose. And I'm not the only one who's noticed. Oh, Alice can hate me all she wants, but I see her eyes tracking the darkness as it creeps along the floor towards the Queen.

She has Neverland's amulet—my amulet. So why is she still harvesting magic from these poor souls? Has the amulet's power faded? Is that why I can't feel it? And Smee... where is he in all of this?

But more than that, there's Alice—because I can feel the power radiating from her. Despite the way she loathes me, something pulls me toward her, like a tide I can't resist. It's not just magic—though there's plenty of that, starlight practically bleeding through her skin. It's something else, something deeper. Something I need to understand.

Is that what the mirror meant? Does she somehow hold Neverland's power now?

I manoeuvre through the rounds with calculated precision, edging closer to her. While the others stumble about, she moves with defiant grace, each step a challenge to the Queen's authority. Foolish, yes. But I get it—she's furious, and rightfully so.

I close the space behind her, just enough that she's got no choice but to feel me there. "Quite the performance you put on before. Feel better for it?"

She doesn't answer, but the look she shoots over her shoulder is pure venom, her jaw set tight.

"Nothing to say?" I prod, voice just loud enough for her to hear.

Her shoulders are rigid, fists clenched at her sides. "Nothing to say to the man who let a young girl die. No."

I lean in, matching her pace. "I saved your life. She was going to die anyway."

"I could have helped her."

"No, love. You couldn't. She was dead the moment the Queen decided it so."

She grinds her jaw, refusing to look at me. "Don't talk to me." She turns away, every muscle tense, but her silence speaks louder than words.

The music quickens, and we move faster around the chairs. Another round, another victim. The Queen's glee rings out as another loses their head. The circle grows smaller, fewer chairs, and soon enough we're nearly face-to-face.

When the music stops again, we dive for the chairs, Alice landing just before me. "It's taken."

I drop into the one beside her. The poor bloke behind me isn't so lucky, dragged to the block. His protests are cut short by the Queen's bored command. "Off with his head." Another chair gone, another life snuffed out. The Queen feeds on it, and Alice's eyes are fixed on her, watching. She sees it now.

"You see that?" I murmur.

She doesn't answer right away, not until we stop again and another life is taken. Her gaze drifts to the shadows. "She's feeding off them."

"Clever girl."

She shoots me a look, eyes narrowing.

The next time the music stops, I make sure to claim my chair, and I keep it right beside hers. The Queen's gaze narrows, but I just give her my most charming smile. Let her think whatever she likes.

"What does she want?" Alice asks, though I doubt it's really meant for me.

"Besides everyone's head on a pike? Power. It's always about power with her type."

"Her type?" she asks as we rise again, fewer chairs, fewer players.

"Rulers who've forgotten what real power feels like. They'll grab at anything that might make them feel it again."

"And what do *you* know about real power?" she challenges, and damn if that fire in her voice doesn't do things to me.

I catch her arm as we circle, spinning her so she's facing me. Even with her mask still in place, her eyes say everything her mouth doesn't. "More than you might think," I murmur.

The Queen claps her hands, and the music shifts—darker, faster. "Let's make this interesting," she calls out, voice dripping with wicked glee. "The shadows want to play too."

Black tendrils coil around our feet, making each step treacherous. Two more players stumble, consumed by the darkness, their screams swallowed as they're dragged away.

Four left.

"Careful now," I warn Alice as a shadow nearly trips her. Without thinking, I steady her with a hand on her waist. She's warm, alive, that strange magic humming beneath her skin.

"I don't need your help," she snaps, but she doesn't pull away.

"Of course you don't, love."

The music stops; we both dive for chairs. The man next to Alice isn't fast enough—the shadows wrap around his ankles, pulling him down.

Three left.

Just me, Alice, and some trembling fool who looks ready to collapse.

The Queen leans forward on her throne, eyes glittering with malice. "Oh, this is delightful," she purrs. "Our dear Alice, our charming Captain, and..." she waves her hand dismissively at the third player. "Well, we won't have to worry about him much longer."

She's right. The next round, the shadows claim him before he even has a chance to move.

And then there were two.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

ALICE

IT'S JUST the two of us now. One chair, two players, and this is a choice I really, really don't want to make.

Hook circles the chair like he's savouring every second, all smooth movements and that damned smug smile. I've never wanted to kill someone before, but I could consider making an exception.

The shadows coil around our feet, each step feeling like a dangerous dance. I have to keep an eye on Hook, another on the shadows, and somehow still track what the Queen's doing. She's enjoying this spectacle as well, clapping slowly, a twisted grin lighting her face as she sits on her throne, barely containing her excitement. My heart's hammering so hard I swear it might leap right out of my chest and land on the floor between us—though at least that would end this game.

And that's the thing. Someone has to die. Me or him. How do you choose who? If I win, I'm sentencing him to death; if I lose, I'm sacrificing myself. Would he do the same for me? I know he wouldn't. Rosie proved that. But I don't know how to be selfish. I don't know how to choose my life over another's.

And damn him, if he doesn't know it too, because I swear he's grinning, seeing right through me.

"Enjoying yourself, Princess?" His voice drips with sarcasm.

I narrow my eyes. "Absolutely. Can't you tell?"

"Good, good." His smirk deepens.

The shadows shift around us, pulling, prodding. They almost dance with him, as if they're eager to take him along. I try to dodge mine, jumping back as they press against me, shoving me away from the chair. It seems the more I resist, the harder they pull and tug, as if determined to steer me off course.

My stomach flips every time I catch sight of the blood pooling around the chopping block. I barely have time to process it. So many lives she's taken. Bodies pile up in a massive wheeled trough pushed to the back, one arm hanging over the edge. I don't even want to think about how she has everything ready and prepared for such a thing, as though it's just part of the day's work.

Why did I get on that train? Why did I follow that trail of cards? I could've stayed with my mother a couple of days, said my goodbyes to Gran, and gone back home. Easy. Not this. Silly, silly Alice.

"You're worrying." Hook's voice cuts through, and the shadows push me so close to him I nearly crash into his chest.

I jerk back, spinning from his grasp. "I'm not."

"Oh, you are," he says. "I can see it on your face."

I'm spun around again by shadows, caught up in this mad, unstoppable dance.

"You know I'll win over you," he murmurs, low and close, as though relishing every word. "Even if it means your pretty head goes rolling."

I swallow hard. "I don't doubt that."

He studies me as we spin, this strange and deadly dance only seeming to intensify. He's far too calm, too at ease in the midst of it all, as if the shadows obey him, like he's completely at home in their grip. Meanwhile, every step I take feels forced, wrong, like I'm somehow out of sync with everything around me.

I hate him, I decide. I hate, hate him. If I could wipe that smug smirk off his face, I would.

"One of us has to win," he murmurs as we're pulled close again. His eyes glint in the dark. "Better it be me than you?"

I don't even get the chance to reply—not that I know what I'd say. The music picks up speed, forcing us to move faster, circling each other, neither one willing to back down. I bet he doesn't feel half as guilty as I do.

A shadow darts toward me, and I jump, nearly crashing into him again. His hand lands on my waist. "Easy there, love." Steadying me before he spins me away, pushing me back into the shadows.

"You don't need to help me," I snap, even though my skin tingles where he touched me.

A shadow slips between us, forcing us apart. The Queen watches from her throne, buzzing with amusement, her eyes gleaming as she drinks in the show. The music swells, growing faster and more intense, practically taunting us to give in.

"This isn't right," I mutter to myself, more than to him. "Making us choose who lives and who dies."

We both jump back as shadows surge, trying to trip us up. Hook moves like he's done this a hundred times before, every step annoyingly smooth and sure. I try to match him, refusing to show any weakness, even as my mind screams at me to do the exact opposite.

"Ready to give up?" he taunts, though there's something in his voice—a hint of concern.

"As if." I duck under a shadow whipping past my head. "I could keep doing this all night."

"As tempting as that sounds..." He winks, and I absolutely don't feel anything at all. Not even a twinge. Definitely not.

The music stops, and we both lunge for the chair, everything blurring in that split second. My fingers barely brush the back when he moves like lightning, grabbing the chair just as I go to sit, and swings it away from me. I stumble, landing flat on my backside while he settles in smoothly, a smug grin spreading across his face.

"You arse," I glare up at him from the floor. "Honestly, screw you."

He just grins, looking far too pleased with himself. "Too slow."

"You cheated."

He shrugs, his expression shifting to something more serious. For a split second, it almost looks like he's worried. Then he winks again, managing to be both infuriating and intriguing at once. "Watch this, love. You can thank me later."

I open my mouth to tell him exactly what I think of him, but the guards are already moving towards me, spears at the ready. The Queen leans forward, practically glowing with anticipation.

"Off with her—" she begins, but Hook cuts her off.

“Your Majesty,” he bows, his voice smooth as silk but carrying an edge of steel. Rising with theatrical grace, he says, “Surely you wouldn’t waste such delightful entertainment?”

The Queen’s hand freezes midair, her eyes narrowing. “Oh?” Her brows raise. “And why shouldn’t I?”

“Look at her,” Hook says, gesturing towards me with a sweep of his hand. I’m still on the floor, my dress splayed around me, fury probably radiating off me. “Such fire. Such defiance. When was the last time you had a prisoner with actual spirit?”

I scramble to my feet, ready to tell him exactly where he can shove his observations, but he shoots me a look that clearly says, *‘Shut up and let me handle this.’* And while I don’t trust him to handle anything on my behalf, I stay quiet. For now.

“Imagine what you could accomplish with a little finesse. A little help—from me.” He flashes the Queen a charming, confident smile.

The Queen tilts her head, considering. “She is rather... spirited.”

“Precisely.” Hook strides toward the throne, all charm and confidence. “These other poor souls—they break so easily. But her?” He glances back at me, and there’s something darkly amused in his gaze that makes my breath catch. “Imagine what it’d be like to break her slowly, in your own way. Really enjoy the game. You could send her to the block, and yes, the guard would take her head... but after? Where’s the satisfaction in that?”

He looks up, as if envisioning my end at his hands and savouring every bit of it. “Think how wonderful it would feel to watch her fall apart.”

The Queen’s lips curl into a cruel smile. “Are you suggesting I spare her?”

“I’m suggesting,” Hook says, dropping to one knee before her throne, “that you save the best entertainment for last. Why rush to end her story when she could provide so much more... amusement?”

The Queen’s gaze shifts to me, eyes calculating. She’s considering it. “And what would you offer in exchange for her life, Captain?”

“A challenge,” he replies without hesitation, a wicked glint in his eyes. “Any trial you devise. Something worthy of your creativity—and my,” he pauses, flashing me a maddening grin, “particular talents.”

“And what if I take off your head instead of hers?” she asks, her tone a silky threat.

Hook squares his shoulders, licking his bottom lip slowly, deliberately. He's bloody flirting. My life hangs in the balance, and he flirts. "We could be brilliant together, you and I. Think of all the wonderfully wicked things we could do."

"You risk your own life to save hers?" The Queen's eyes narrow, intrigued. "How gallant."

"Hardly gallant, Your Majesty." Could his voice drip with any more charm? "I simply appreciate quality entertainment. And watching her fight against your shadows? Exquisite."

I want to protest, to tell him I don't need his help or his bargaining, but something in the way he holds himself stops me. This is a game he knows far better than I ever could. It's one he plays with unnerving ease.

The Queen rises slowly, circling Hook, her gaze piercing. "You intrigue me, Captain. Very well." She snaps her fingers, and her guards immediately move to flank me. "Take her back to the cells. We'll save her... for now."

Hook rises smoothly, meeting her gaze. "You won't regret it, Your Majesty," he says as the guards grab my arms.

"Oh, I know I won't," she purrs, trailing a finger down his chest. "Because if you fail my challenge, I'll have the pleasure of executing you both."

The guards begin to drag me away, but I catch Hook's eyes one last time. He winks, mouthing something that looks suspiciously like, '*Trust me.*'

I'm not sure which is worse—the fact that he's just bargained for my life or that some part of me actually wants to trust him.

As they pull me through the ballroom doors, I hear the Queen's voice, sweet and venomous. "Now, Captain, let's see how well you play."

Chapter Thirty

HOOK

THE GUARDS SHOVE me back into my room, and the door slams with enough force to wake the dead, which, given the Queen's proclivities, might actually be wandering these halls. I press my hands to the cold wood, listening as their footsteps retreat. Of course, the door's locked again. Why wouldn't it be? When I'm sure they're gone, I let out a breath, letting my shoulders sag a little.

What a bloody performance that was downstairs—and what a show it could've been.

But Alice is alive. Alive and probably plotting creative ways to murder me, but breathing nonetheless. I'll be sure to collect her gratitude later.

I pace the length of my room, boots silent on the plush carpet, the Queen's smug smile lingering in my mind, along with the way her fingers trailed down my chest right before she dismissed me. She thinks she's won something—secured my loyalty or maybe my fear. Ha. Any half-decent pirate knows better than to trust a charming smile and pretty words, no matter how attractive the package.

Foolish Queen.

I am no fool.

But even I can't deny the relief I feel. Alice is alive, locked up, yes; furious with me, certainly; and here I am, wearing a hole in the Queen's fancy rug, thinking about her survival like some hero in a fairy tale.

The Hook of the past would've let her die. He'd have walked away, charmed the Queen, and not given that girl another thought. But... when she hit that floor... something in me snapped. It's like my compass found true north—except this compass points straight down to the dungeons.

Damn it. What the hell is wrong with me?

Not enough seawater in my veins, maybe. I'm going soft. Too soft.

"All for a pretty face and a sweet smile, eh?" I mutter, running a hand through my hair and catching sight of myself in the long-standing mirror. I step closer, searching my own reflection for some sign of weakness, something to explain this madness. "You're going soft, mate. This place is turning you into a right proper gentleman."

But Alice isn't some swooning maiden waiting for a rescue, is she? During that twisted game of the Queen's, while everyone else was trembling, Alice was different. Calculating. Those eyes never missed a damn trick, that mind of hers working like clockwork—and I'm damn sure she noticed what I did, the way those shadows shifted toward the Queen every time a head rolled.

There's something about her—that defiant spark, the way she stood up to the Queen, and that strange flicker of magic in the air around her. What is that?

I have to think about it, about what I felt. Magic to me is like a beacon. I'm no pirate chasing X marks or buried treasure—I feel magic. It's warm, delicate, like the glittering feel of starlight against my skin, and I feel that with Alice. I think, maybe...

God, listen to myself. My head's gone to rot.

But then... the mirror. His words echo in my mind too, like a persistent hangover. "She's the key."

And if that's true—if she really is the key to me finding the amulet—then I have to go and get her, don't I? I *need* her. That's why I'll save her, because I need her to help me. And that's the only reason for it.

I know the amulet isn't here, either. I'm not sure where the Queen would've hidden it, but hidden it she has. No trace of Smee, no pulse of power, and if she had him, she and I would be playing a whole different game. Unless, of course, she's playing with me, too.

I glance out the window, trying to shove down my racing thoughts. I could climb down, leave this place, and hunt for Smee and the amulet on my own. But...

No. I need to go down. I need to get to her.

I press my fists into my temples, clenching in frustration. “What the hell...” I stop pacing, glancing out of the window again, taking in the moonlit gardens below. All heart-shaped red roses, as bright as they come. Guards patrol the grounds, their armour gleaming as they pass under the shadows cast by the Queen’s palace. She’s not taking any chances tonight, though only two of us survived that game. I wonder how many of her subjects she still has locked up?

I’d say the Queen doesn’t quite know what she’s dealing with.

But I do. And if that girl can’t lead me to the amulet, she’ll at least prove useful.

I step closer to the window, testing the latch. Still unlocked. Either the Queen’s very confident or very foolish. Likely both. Cool night air rushes in as I swing the window open, leaning out to study the stonework below—perfectly ridiculous with its overdone flourishes. Might as well be a ladder for me.

Well, hey-ho. Here we go.

With a quick glance around, I ease myself out, finding solid footing on one of the ornamental gargoyles. The climb down is almost too easy; those dramatic bits of architecture practically beg for an escape. I pause at each window, checking for guards, but all is quiet inside. The earlier excitement has died down, leaving only the regular patrols.

Interesting.

Good, though. I can work around that. The guards stick to a schedule. With a bit of observation, it doesn’t take long to understand their timings.

When I reach the bottom, I press myself against the wall as two guards shuffle past, oblivious to my presence in the shadows. Are they blind? Stupid? If I were the Queen, I’d have their heads rolling in the courtyard fountains for such plain incompetence. I shouldn’t be able to slip through this palace so easily. Imagine if I wanted to kill the Queen myself? Now that’s an interesting thought.

But I have other matters at hand.

I move along the edge, hidden in the darkness, stopping just behind two guards standing post, listening. I could sneak up and slit one of their throats without a second thought, but the other would likely sound holy hell, and while I am the infamous Captain Hook, I’m not so lax as to think I could take on the entire Queen’s guard single-handed.

I inch back, pressing myself into some twisted rose vines snaking up the wall, waiting as the guards talk.

“What’s she doing back?” one grunts.

“Who knows, eh? Can’t mean anything good.”

“Bloody place has been crumblin’ for years. Fell apart the second she started meddlin’ where she shouldn’t. And then she went and—”

“Stop. Shut up. Talkin’ like that’ll get your tongue cut out. Or worse,” his mate hisses.

I cock an eyebrow, intrigued. Interesting. Oh, Alice, what did you do?

The guards finally lumber off, and I slip around the corner toward the service entrance, practically smirking as I see the pathetic excuse for a lock. Really? A Queen so paranoid about power, yet she’s left her security this shoddy. With a flick of my wrist and a bit of jiggery-pokery with a lockpick, the latch clicks open. The door eases inward with barely a creak, revealing a narrow stone staircase, spiralling down into darkness.

Perfect. Well done, me.

The air grows colder as I descend, the walls pressing in tighter, the silence thick and watchful. Torches flicker in iron brackets, casting twisted shadows across the rough stone, their light just enough to guide my way. I move silently, keeping to the edges of the steps as I go deeper.

At the bottom of the stairs, I pause, pressing myself against the wall as muffled voices echo down the corridor—more guards, likely killing time. They’re playing cards or something equally pointless. Apparently, it’s amateur hour in the Queen’s domain. I edge closer, the rough stone cool against my back, until I can make out their conversation—more idle prattle about why Alice is back.

“What’s the big deal, anyway?”

“Weird one, that Alice. Always was. Even when she was a kid, she came ‘ere causin’ trouble, stickin’ her nose in business that ain’t none of hers.”

“You were there then?”

“Yeah. Everyone was here then. When she beat the Queen. Should’a seen her face. I thought we was proper done for, but then... she left.”

Well, well, well. Our little ray of sunshine has a history here.

The voices fade as the guards move off, and I wait until their footsteps disappear before moving forward. The cell block stretches out before me, dark, damp, and laced with the stench of mould and decay. Iron doors line

both sides with only faint torchlight casting shadows that slither across the floor like something alive. Most of the cells are empty, but a few still hold prisoners, likely saved for more of the Queen's games.

I don't need them, though. I need... somewhere down here... The air is thick with Alice's lingering magic, thrumming faintly at the edge of my awareness, strong enough to lead me through this maze.

With a steadying breath, I close my eyes, tuning into the faint pulse still simmering in my chest—a spark, dim and fading, but enough. And then, there it is—a soft hum, the lure of something alive, something almost feral. Alice. The glow comes from one of the cells farther down, potent as stardust.

I creep along the narrow path, peering into the cells as I go. One holds a figure curled on its side—a man, defeated and worn. A crumpled top hat lies beside him, alongside a tattered jacket in mismatched patchwork. Poor sod. I move along. More empty cells. Then... there she is.

I peer through the heart-shaped hole in the door. She sits cross-legged on the floor, her back pressed to the wall, eyes closed. The ball gown she still wears pools around her like dark water, a stark contrast against the grey of the stone. Her mask is gone, and in the dim light, I finally see her face—a softness there, something genuine, unlike the Queen's sharp, deadly beauty. Somehow, she's even more intriguing like this, her fierce defiance softened, but only a little.

She hasn't noticed me, lost in her thoughts. I take a moment to study her, trying to grasp what it is that pulls me in. Is it her magic? That spark of rebellion? Or something else entirely?

"I know you're there," she says suddenly, her voice cutting through the quiet, sharp and annoyed. She doesn't open her eyes, but there's no mistaking the irritation in her tone. "Come to gloat? Or maybe cheat again."

I can't help but smirk. "I didn't cheat. I won."

That makes her open her eyes, and damn me if she doesn't stare right through the tiny gap in the door, piercing me to my core. "You cheated." She enunciates both words. "That chair was mine."

I shrug, knowing full well she can't see me, but old habits die hard. "Potato, potahto. You're alive, aren't you?"

She narrows her eyes. "Are you here to gloat about that, too?"

"No. I'm here to rescue you."

She stands in one fluid motion, stepping closer to the door. Her presence is magnetic, even with the iron barrier between us. "I don't want your help, nor do I need it. Thank you very much."

"Oh? You have a grand escape plan, do you? Do tell."

She presses her face right into the gap, and I can almost hear the gears turning. "What do you want, Hook? Why risk life and limb to come down here and 'save' me?"

"Maybe I just wanted to help. Felt bad for winning."

"Cheating." She narrows her eyes further. "I don't buy it for a second. What do you really want?"

I could feign some hurt, play the fool, but there's no time. Footsteps echo down the hallway, growing louder. I glance around, spotting the empty cell next to hers. Slipping inside, I tear a piece of fabric from the bottom of my shirt and wedge it over the latch so it won't lock properly.

We both go quiet as the guards pass by, their boots heavy against the stone, voices low as they chatter about some nonsense I couldn't care less about. The moment they're out of earshot, I open my cell door and return to hers.

I pull a thin piece of metal from my pocket and start working on her lock. "Time to go, love."

The lock clicks open with beautiful efficiency. I swing the door wide and offer her my hand. "Your carriage awaits, my Lady."

She backs away, eyes narrowing. "And why should I trust you?"

"Because right now, darling, I'm your only option."

More footsteps thunder down the corridor. Bloody hell, these guards are persistent tonight. Without waiting for her permission, I slip into her cell, pulling the door nearly closed behind me.

The cell is unbelievably cramped, the walls within arm's reach if I stand in the middle. "What are you doing?" Alice hisses.

I press a finger to my lips, backing us both into the shadows. The cell feels even smaller with both of us inside, her warmth radiating against my chest. "Saving both our skins. Unless you'd like to explain to the guards why I'm here?"

She glares at me but stays quiet as the guards pass. I'm acutely aware of every breath she takes, every slight movement. Bloody hell, this was not part of the plan.

Chapter Thirty-One

ALICE

HOOK'S CHEST presses against my back as we hide in the shadows, his breath warm against my neck. The cell suddenly feels impossibly small, and the fact that I can't shove him away without making noise makes it so much worse. "Tell me what you want," I whisper once the guards pass.

He stiffens behind me, not bristling, just stilling and listening. He raises a brow. "What I want?"

I nod at him. He isn't fooling me for a second. "Men like you always want something," I say, which earns me a look—his dark eyes gleaming, not quite black, but sharp, almost magical. He cocks a brow.

"Men like me?"

I square myself, refusing to be intimidated by how close he's standing, arms crossed, and stare him down. "Yes, men like you—ruthless, self-centred, cheat-at-everything types. Shall I go on? I know your type. You wouldn't have stopped the Queen from taking my head unless it suited you. So I'll ask again. What do you want?"

He regards me with a smirk, the corners of that annoyingly perfect mouth lifting just enough to reveal faint dimples. "Such wounding words." He places a hand over his heart in mock offence. "Can't a man simply want to rescue a damsel in distress?"

"I am no damsel."

He eyes me coolly for a moment. "No," he says so readily that I want to shove him again. But he studies me with unsettling intent. "You are

definitely not that.”

The way he looks at me sends involuntary shivers through my body, and I fold my arms tight, trying to fight it. “So what is it that you want?”

Tension works along his jaw as if he’s deciding whether to lie. In the end, he sighs, his voice briefly losing its playful edge. “Neverland... it’s dying,” he admits, making my own heart stutter. “I saw Wonderland for a brief moment before the Queen’s guards took me. It’s dying.”

“What do you mean?”

He glances out of the tiny gap in the door and raises a hand to silence me. We both go quiet again as the guards pass by, waiting until they’re out of earshot. Only then does he continue.

“The Queen stole something from our world, something that gives Neverland its power—and it’s gone. The children are ageing. Hollowlanders aren’t dreaming, and I’m going grey.” He runs a hand through his hair, pointing at a few faint specks.

I shake my head at him, rolling my eyes. “They make you look distinguished. Anyway, I thought you were supposed to be old. That’s what the stories say you are—that Captain Hook, aren’t you?”

He scowls, his turn to fold his arms. “That was a vicious lie created to make me look bad.”

“Okay, so the Queen stole something. What does that have to do with me?”

I can see him visibly close up, though not all the way. “The mirror told me you were the key.”

Now it’s my turn to stare, unsure which part to question. “The mirror said I was a key? A mirror talked to you? You do realise that’s your reflection, right?”

He waves a hand dismissively. “Alice, Alice, Alice... so, what—you don’t want anything?”

He scoffs, a cynical edge to his voice. “No one wants nothing. Everyone’s after something, even the saints. Even if it’s just to feel better about themselves, people always want something.”

But what do I want? Do I even know? “To go home,” I say.

“Back to the Hollowlands?” he asks.

“No.” I shrug. “Back to—I’m not even sure what to call it. Earth? England? The place up there.”

He smirks, wild and lazy and irritatingly smug. “That is Earth too, love. Where do you think you are?”

He’s infuriating. He doesn’t even say much; it’s his tone, his smug expression. I could easily wring his neck if I got the chance.

“Wonderland,” I say, making my tone just as condescending as his.

“Right. And Wonderland is part of Earth, just not... maybe the Earth you’re used to.”

I scowl at him. “Don’t be a jerk.”

He goes serious, his gaze sharpening. And then, he bites his lip—bites his goddamn lip. I sigh inside.

“How about we strike a deal?” he says. “You help me find what I need, and I’ll help you get out of here. We could help each other.”

“Tempting,” I say, “but if this is Wonderland, and I’m not going insane or dreaming, then I know enough not to trust a word anyone says.”

“Why would you be dreaming?”

“Because this place is all madness.”

“Just because you don’t understand it, it’s madness?”

“It is not a dream,” says the voice from the cell beside mine, startling me. I’d almost forgotten the hare was there. “You must help him... help us.”

The Queen didn’t bring him to the ballroom, nor did she hurt him. Maybe because the Hare is frail? It doesn’t matter, I suppose. Trying to work the Queen out is like trying to solve one of those impossible puzzles my grandmother used to love. Puzzles that were just... unsolvable.

Everything in me screams to leave, to stay clear of whatever schemes they’re pulling me into. I know, deep in my heart, that once I get tangled in this, I’ll end up lost and confused—more so than I am now. Nothing will make sense. By the end, I’d be lucky to even remember my own name.

Hook leans into the door, peering out. “I think the coast is clear. We should go.”

He opens it a fraction, but I hesitate. “I’m not leaving without the others.”

He glances over his shoulder, staring at me in disbelief. “You want us to parade all the prisoners out? Are you sure you’re not the one who’s mad?”

“I’m beginning to think so. But I won’t leave them to whatever the Queen has planned. She’ll kill them. It’s not madness; it’s called thinking

of others—something I’m sure you’re not familiar with.”

“You can’t take us,” the hare says. “I’m too frail to walk. You must go.”

“I can’t just leave you. I...”

“You can,” Hare says. “You can and you will. Saving Wonderland will save us.”

I move closer to the heart-shaped gap in his cell door and look at him. He’s so worn down, so tired. He’s nothing like the Hare I remember. Back then, he was vibrant, singing and full of life... and this broken creature hardly resembles him at all.

“You must go, Alice. You are Wonderland’s only hope.”

“You defeated the Queen once,” Hare says. “You can do it again.”

I swallow hard. “I don’t even know how. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. This... how do I save Wonderland?”

“Seek the door that was never there, in a hall where memories snare.

Through paths that twist and turn like time, seek what was lost, now shrouded in grime.

The Queen keeps close what she fears the most, hidden in echoes of forgotten ghosts.

Not all is what it seems to be—watch for a mirror that lies to thee.

The key you seek is buried deep, in the place where memories sleep.”

I glance around, trying to find the source of the voice. “Who said that?”

The Hare steps back, lifting his small light to shine it through the heart-shaped hole on the other side of his cell. A purple, once-bright but now faded eye stares back at me.

“Hatter.”

“Save us, Alice,” he says. “The clock’s hands are snipping at my sleeves, dear girl. Quick—find the left-behind key that wasn’t lost.”

“What?”

“He’s telling us to go,” Hook says, and before I can protest, he takes my hand, pulling me out of my cell and into the darkness.

Chapter Thirty-Two

HOOK

I DRAG Alice along the corridor, her heels scuffing against the stone as she tries to pull back. "Stop it," she hisses, yanking her arm free, and I turn to look at her, brow arched.

"Whatever you're thinking of doing, it's a terrible idea," I say, noting the stubborn set in her eyes. She's about to go soft, I can feel it.

"I can't just leave them there," she snaps. "They're my friends—something you know nothing about."

"You can, and you will."

"No, I—"

I cock an eyebrow. "Oh? Do you have some brilliant plan you haven't told me? Or is this the 'let's get captured again' special?"

She glares, eyes blazing. "Leave if you want to. I can do this without you. You're the one who needs me, remember?"

I swear to god, I could— My thought's cut off by the sound of guards again. Is there no end to this?

"Come on." I grab her arm again, pulling her along as we dart through the maze of dark corridors.

Alice mutters something under her breath—unflattering, I'd wager—but she picks up her pace, practically vibrating with indignation. I lead her down twists and turns, not bothering with the way I came in. I pretend to know where I'm going, but mostly, I'm just feeling for it, hoping.

"Where are we even going?" she snaps.

“Somewhere that doesn’t end with us beheaded,” I reply, stopping us for a moment to peer around the next corner. Once it’s clear, I tug her along, and we slip through a narrow doorway that leads to the servants’ quarters.

It’s the kitchen. A large, grimy table sits in the centre, scarred and pitted from years of careless knife strokes. Cabinets hang open on the walls, shelves sagging under mismatched crockery and tarnished cutlery no one’s bothered to polish. The smell—stale bread, spilt wine, and something unpleasantly close to rot—clings to the air, thick enough to choke on. The fireplace in the corner, blackened with soot, looks like it’s been dead for ages, with a single, forgotten kettle dangling above. Dust and cobwebs drape every corner as if even the spiders have given up and moved on.

There’s a door. Two doors, actually—one leading up a few steps and another going down. I pull us toward the second door.

“This way,” I say, figuring it’ll get us out of the palace and give us a path through this maze. Out the grimy window, I can just see the river running beside us, fields beyond that, and the damned roses.

And then, behind us, come the shouts.

A sudden shout echoes down the corridor, sharp and accusing. “They’re gone.”

I freeze, pulling Alice closer into the shadow of the doorway. The clatter of armour follows, louder, more frantic—footsteps pounding, echoing off the stone as the guards scramble. More voices join in, each one more panicked than the last. “Check every cell. She’s got away.”

Another guard’s shout bounces off the walls, growing closer. “They can’t have got far.”

Bloody hell. I grit my teeth, gripping Alice’s arm tighter. The guards are spreading out, hunting, their footsteps quickening, closing in on us.

We reach the door with the steps leading up, and I push it open, guiding Alice inside. We start up the narrow staircase, but just as we reach the second step, the unmistakable clang of armour sounds from above. Goddamn it.. I grab Alice, yanking her back down the steps as quietly as I can.

“Wrong way, love,” I whisper, dragging her toward the other door. I pull it open, the smell of damp and river water immediately hitting us, and

peer out. It's not the river, but a drop, long and hard. "Hell." No path, no ledge. Just a drop into the unknown.

Before Alice can protest, the guards storm into the kitchen behind us, voices loud and urgent. She turns instinctively to face them, but I grab her shoulders, pulling her back around. "No time for heroics," I mutter, giving her one last smirk before shoving her forward.

"Hook, no," she shrieks, eyes wide as she tumbles forward, disappearing into the dark below, her scream echoing off the stone walls. Almost satisfying in itself. I leap after her, the guards' shouts fading as I plunge into the darkness.

The floor drops out beneath me, and instead of a straightforward fall, I'm whipped down what can only be described as a slide—pitch black, slick, twisting and turning like it's got a mind of its own. I'm thrown from side to side, my shoulder slamming against the stone curve as it jerks me around yet another bend.

The slide pitches down, steep and fast, and just when I think it can't get any worse, it levels out slightly, only to twist sharply again, sending me skidding around a curve, my fingers barely finding any grip. Water slicks the walls, making everything slippery and unpredictable. In flashes, I catch glimpses of Alice's silhouette just ahead of me, her hair whipping around as she tumbles, no more in control than I am.

The last bend hurtles me forward, the cold air rushing past as I'm spit out into the open, the stone giving way to empty air—just long enough to realise that the ride isn't over yet.

We crash into misty water, the cold plunge knocking the breath from me as I'm dragged under, no footing in the deep. I struggle upwards, breaking the surface with a sputtering gasp.

"There," A guard shouts from above. "There they are,"

Bloody hell. They must have found some shortcut down—no twisting slide of doom for them, lucky bastards.

"Hook," Alice calls, a note of panic in her voice.

"Swim," I shout back. "Go."

The guards line up at the water's edge, bows raised, swords drawn. None of them jumps in to follow, which I'd call cowardice if I didn't see the reason why...

"Alice..." My gaze shifts, and hers follows. At the far end of what appears to be a cavernous underground lake, shadowed figures lounge on

jagged rocks. They're like mermaids, but monstrous—dark scales shimmering in the dim light, teeth glinting as they grin and cackle, their eyes sharp and black. Their whispering voices echo, a haunting melody bouncing off the cave walls, chilling the blood in my veins.

Then come the arrows. They pierce the mist, raining down from above.

“Go, go,” I shout, shoving her forward, forcing her to swim. I dive below the surface, kicking hard to keep up with her, the twisted laughter of the mer-creatures on one side, the arrows raining down from the guards on the other.

An arrow splashes into the water beside me, close enough to feel the rippling shock. I push Alice forward again. “Unless you'd like to sample the Queen's archery skills, I suggest you move.”

She shoots me a glare but kicks furiously, swimming towards a faint opening in the rock face that seems close, but hell, it might as well be miles away. Arrows slice through the air, whizzing past, splashing into the water around us. I twist, trying to dodge, but pain rips through me as one finds its mark in my shoulder, the force jolting me back. I grit my teeth, muscles searing with every stroke, but I keep swimming, forcing myself to stay afloat and keep up.

We reach the cave opening, the cold night air hitting us. Relief floods over me—until I look down. Hell. No.

It's not an exit. It's a bloody waterfall.

“Hook, grab this,” Alice shouts, gripping a rock at the edge. She reaches out, her reflexes quick, but I shake my head, barely hanging on myself.

“Jump,” I shout. “They're coming.”

The guards are far behind now, but as I glance back, five sleek heads bob up in the water, inky eyes watching, their sharp-toothed grins growing wider. Without another second to think, I grab Alice's hand, pull her close, and we leap into the dark void below.

Chapter Thirty-Three

ALICE

OH MY GOD. The water is freezing. And I don't just mean cold—I mean the kind of cold that bites right through your skin, claws into your bones, and refuses to let go. Despite the clear night, with not a single flake of frost in sight, it feels like we've plunged into the iciest, most miserable pool on the planet. Mist hovers over the surface, swirling in wisps as tiny insects dance across it.

There's no time to complain.

"Swim," Hook barks, shoving me forward, his voice low and urgent.

"I am swimming," I snap back, arms and legs churning against the icy pull of the water. I give it everything I've got, slicing through the lake like I'm fighting for my life—because, well, I am. Each stroke feels like pushing through an ice bath. My muscles scream in protest, but I grit my teeth and keep going.

"Faster, Alice," he shouts from somewhere behind me, barely audible over the rush of water.

Oh, I'm sorry, am I not dying fast enough for you? I glance back to find him trailing me, his movements efficient but not as fast as I expected. You'd think a pirate would be a stronger swimmer.

Finally, everything goes quiet. Just the sound of our breathing and the water lapping around us. We're far enough away from the waterfall now, so I dare to glance back, my heart pounding, my body aching.

There's nothing.

No guards. No arrows slicing through the mist. No mer-monsters lurking at the water's edge. Just us.

I exhale, my pulse beginning to steady as I tread water. "I think we lost them," I say, as Hook swims up beside me.

The water has made his eyes brighter, the dark lashes framing them somehow even blacker. Jesus.

He huffs, glancing around, finally seeing what I do—nothing but darkness and mist. "They're stuck up there," he says. "Too yellow-bellied to make the jump themselves."

I squint up at the waterfall. The mer-things are clustered at the top, staring down at us, their tails flicking in the mist as they lean over the edge, almost hypnotised. Then, one of them drops off the ledge.

I narrow my eyes. "Are they..."

"Yep." His shoulder presses against mine, urgency radiating off him. "Get to shore. They can't come out of the water." He jerks his head towards a shadowy bank ahead. "There."

Easier said than done.

The current is wild—pulling one way, then spinning me around the next. I grit my teeth, fighting against it with everything I've got. By the time we reach the shore, I'm half-dead, stumbling onto the dry land with all the grace of a drowned rat.

Hook drags himself out just behind me, shivering, lips tinged blue, but somehow still managing to stand there like he's waltzed out of a goddamn fairy tale. A soggy, glorious mess of a man.

Not looking. Definitely not looking. This is not the time for my brain to start wandering into dangerous territory.

"So, genius," I ask, teeth chattering. "What now?"

He runs a hand through his hair, brushing it back—and god help me, even cold and soaked, he somehow manages to look infuriatingly perfect. His hair sticks up wildly, the wet strands catching what little light there is. It's the first time I've really seen him—really looked at him—without the mask.

There's faint stubble along his jaw, just enough to darken his face in a way that suits him. A thin scar cuts through his left eyebrow, subtle but there, adding to the rugged, dangerous aura he wears like a second skin.

But even the great Hook can't hide the fact that he's cold. He's shivering, though he stands tall, refusing to show any weakness.

“There,” he says, nodding towards a dark shape further along the shore, just barely visible through the mist.

I squint. “That wasn’t there before.”

Hook frowns at me, the kind of look that says he’s already decided I’ve lost my mind. Honestly, I’m beginning to think I have.

“Of course it was,” he says, dismissive as ever. Without another word, he’s heading straight for it. “You coming, or just standing there looking pretty?”

I squint again, catching the faint words carved into the weathered wooden sign swinging in the moonlight: The Jump Inn. Beneath it, a narrow plank stretches precariously over the dark water. Ha. No, thank you. I’ve had my fill of the lake tonight.

“Are you even sure it’s open?” I call, glancing warily at the eerie, abandoned building.

I don’t remember this place from my last visit. Even with Wonderland’s vibrancy drained and replaced by rot and decay, this part feels... forgotten. Lost.

The building is cloaked in darkness, its roof sagging like it’s barely hanging on. Overgrown vines crawl up the walls, clutching the structure like they’re trying to pull it under. The windows are intact, the door sturdy enough, but the place hasn’t seen life in decades.

“It doesn’t matter,” Hook throws over his shoulder with a dismissive wave. “It’s somewhere to rest. Unless, of course, you’d rather stay out here and wait for those things to catch up with us. Or maybe those.”

He nods toward the sky, and my stomach flips. The bat-like creatures Absolem and I saw earlier are circling again, swooping low through the mist, scanning the landscape.

“Are they... looking for us?” I ask, shivering despite myself.

“I’d say that’s a safe assumption. So, unless you fancy dinner with the Queen tonight, I suggest you move.”

I scowl, but he’s already turned away, standing there with his insufferable smug expression. His hands rest at his sides like he’s daring me to question him. Then, without waiting for a response, he disappears through the door.

“Unbelievable,” I mutter, hurrying after him.

The moment I step inside, I hesitate. The air is thick with dust, and the stillness is almost suffocating. This place hasn’t seen life in a long time.

Tables and chairs sit perfectly arranged, as if waiting for guests who never came. Plates and glasses are set out, untouched, coated in grime. Coats hang neatly on a rack by the door, frozen in time.

In the centre of the room is a large fireplace, dark and blanketed in dust. My body aches for its warmth, but it's as lifeless as the rest of the place.

"There's no one here," I say, shutting the door behind me—not that it'll do much good against the cold creeping through the cracks.

"No?" Hook raises an eyebrow, a challenge glinting in his eyes. "Maybe you're just not looking hard enough." Before I can question him, he strides over to the bar and slams his hands down. The sound echoes like a crack of thunder. "Barkeep."

The transformation is immediate—and chilling.

Candles sputter to life, their flames casting eerie shadows that stretch and shift along the walls. The darkness retreats just enough to reveal figures filling the tables and leaning against the bar—ghostly patrons that weren't there a moment ago.

Cobwebbed chandeliers flicker as if caught in a phantom breeze, and the air thickens with murmurs and faint, haunting laughter. It's as though someone flipped a switch, pulling this forgotten inn back from the dead.

Behind the bar, a figure materialises—a tall, thin man with golden, ember-like skin that seems to shimmer in the faint light. His eyes are yellow, slitted like a cat's, and atop his head are ears that twitch and flick like they're listening to something I can't hear.

His hands, translucent as smoke, grip a glass he polishes endlessly, caught in some bizarre loop. His head doesn't move, but his eyes follow us, unblinking.

Hook doesn't bat an eyelid. He leans against the bar, casually sliding a gold coin across the counter. "Do you have a room we could use for the night, good sir?"

The bartender's grin stretches unnaturally wide, his yellow eyes flicking to me before inclining his head. His voice rasps out, barely above a whisper. "Captain." He nods again. "We have only one room, but it is yours—on the house." He slides the coin back toward Hook.

"One is all we need," Hook replies smoothly.

"We're not staying here," I hiss, sidling up to him, trying to ignore the way the ghostly patrons seem to fix their hollow stares on me. They flicker

in and out, solid one second, wispy and insubstantial the next.

Hook glances at me, his expression calm, but I catch the faintest glimmer of amusement in his eyes. “Oh? Do you fancy braving the night out there instead?” He jerks his head toward the door. “Maybe introduce yourself to the creatures circling the mist? Or are you holding out for one of the Queen’s search parties to show up?”

I glare at him. “We could find somewhere else.”

His lips curl into a faint smirk, the kind that makes me want to punch him and ... not going there. “In the middle of the night?” He raises a brow, gesturing to the shadowy windows. “If you want to go back out there, trudging through the dark with the Queen and God knows what else hunting us down, be my guest. I’ll be here—resting, eating, and coming up with a plan for the morning.”

He knows I can’t. And it drives me mad.

“So you have a plan?”

“Not yet,” he replies, tapping his temple as though he’s brimming with genius. “But I’ll think of one. Relax, love. I’m here. What could possibly go wrong?”

I could list about ten things off the top of my head, but before I can open my mouth, the bartender’s rasp cuts through. “We have honey bread and a fresh cut of ghastr meat, if you so require.”

“Ghastr meat?” I wrinkle my nose. “What is... I’ve never heard of ghastr meat.”

Hook doesn’t even blink. “We’ll take it.”

The bartender’s eerie yellow eyes drift from Hook to me, lingering just long enough to make my skin crawl. He’s sizing me up, like I’m some kind of oddity on display. Hook, naturally, couldn’t care less.

The bartender finally nods, gesturing toward the staircase. “It’ll be sent up.”

“Fantastic,” Hook says. “And might I trouble you for some hot water and fresh towels?”

The bartender nods again. “They’ll be in your room, sir. Would you and the lady care for a bottle of Starfrost?” He bends to retrieve a shimmering ice-blue bottle flecked with silver. “It helps one to think.”

“You’re too kind.” Hook dips his head in a mock bow. “Thank you.”

The bartender mirrors the bow, his grin widening as he straightens. “Merrik,” he says, his raspy voice dragging over the syllables. “And it’s

my pleasure, Captain.”

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Merrik.” Hook’s tone is all charm, but I catch the glint of calculation in his eyes. “We’ll head to our room.”

Chapter Thirty-Four (Renumber)

Alice

The room we’re given is barely an improvement over the tavern below. It’s small, with a single creaky bed, a dusty window, and a bathroom that somehow has actual plumbing—surprising, since this place looks like it hasn’t seen life in decades. A stack of towels sits neatly on the bed, and a fire crackles in the hearth. I don’t question how they managed to get it ready so quickly. I don’t care.

The moment we step inside, I make a beeline for the fire. God, I’m so cold. I can barely feel my fingers, and my dress clings to me like a second skin—damp, freezing, and absolutely miserable. I crouch in front of the flames, holding my hands out, practically pressing them into the warmth. The heat seeps into my skin, chasing away the chill. A shiver runs down my spine as the tingling spreads to my shoulders.

For a second, I close my eyes, soaking it in. The fire crackles, sending flickers of light dancing over the stone hearth, and I swear, it’s the most glorious thing I’ve felt in days.

“Well now,” Hook drawls, leaning against the doorframe. “If I’d known a bit of warmth would get those sounds out of you, I’d have found us a fire ages ago.”

I whip around, glaring over my shoulder. “Don’t flatter yourself. It’s the fire. Not you.”

He smirks, that insufferable, maddening smirk of his, before disappearing into the bathroom.

I huddle closer to the flames, muttering to myself. “Feels like I’ll never get warm.” My teeth chatter as I rub my arms, the damp fabric of my dress doing nothing to help. For a moment, I consider crawling straight into the hearth.

“Do you think this place has hot water?” I call out before I realise, I’ve said it aloud.

His voice floats out from the bathroom, calm and teasing. “It does. But if you’re that cold, love, you could always get out of that dress. I’d be more than happy to relieve you of your... burden.”

My head snaps around, and there he is, leaning in the doorway again, watching me. His smirk is intact, but there's something in his eyes—a flicker of tension, quickly masked.

"I'll survive," I say flatly, turning back to the fire.

"Suit yourself," he replies, tilting his head, his gaze lingering just a moment too long. "But a man could be persuaded to lend a hand. Especially if it means getting you out of the cold."

His smirk doesn't waver, but I catch the way his hand shifts toward his shoulder, his movements too careful to be casual. He straightens with a quiet groan, his breath catching for a split second before he masks it with that same cocky grin. "Let me know if the fire doesn't do the trick."

I scoff, rolling my eyes. "You're very charming. One might almost mistake you for a gentleman."

He bows slightly, his movements deliberate despite the faint wince he tries to hide. "At your service," he says smoothly before disappearing back into the bathroom.

I stare after him, teeth still chattering. I really do need to get out of this dress, but there's nothing else to change into. My eyes drift to the towels stacked neatly on the bed. Maybe I could peel this thing off, hang it to dry, and wrap myself in one of those.

The thought is tempting. Too tempting.

Just as I stand to reach for the towels, I catch sight of Hook leaning against the bathroom sink. His shirt clings to him in a way that's... well, distracting. My gaze trails up, and that's when I see it—a dark stain, running down his back. Barely noticeable in the dim light, but unmistakable. Blood. Seeping through the fabric, all down his shoulder.

"Hook," I stop, frowning. "You're hurt."

He shifts, trying to play it off, but there's a flicker of pain in his expression he can't quite hide. "Ah, it's nothing. Just a little love scratch from our goodbye committee."

"A love scratch that left blood all over your shirt?"

He raises his gaze to meet mine in the mirror, and there's that glint in his eyes again, but it's tinged with something else. "Careful, love. Wouldn't want you going soft on me and acting like you care."

I grit my teeth, hands on my hips. "I'm not going soft. Can't I be concerned about someone who isn't me? Oh wait, you wouldn't know what that's like, would you?"

“Concern is for the weak. It’s what gets you into trouble.” But for a split second, something in his gaze shifts. There’s a flicker of vulnerability, and he’s watching me with a look that’s almost... searching. Like he sees more than I’d ever let a man like him see. Like he’s seeing right through me. It’s unnerving.

“Let me help you,” I say, grabbing one of the washcloths from the pile of towels on the bed. “Take off your shirt.”

Hook raises an eyebrow at me through the dusty mirror. “Now, if you wanted me out of my clothes, love, all you had to do was ask.”

He unbuttons the top slowly, his eyes never leaving mine, and I swear to the gods, I have to remind myself that this man is in it for himself. In the real world, I would never talk to someone like Hook—all charm and cockiness. But here? He’s all I’ve got.

I take a breath, grab one of the chairs by the small table, and make him sit down at the sink. The room is dimly lit by a handful of candles, so I pull a few closer, squinting at his shoulder to see exactly what’s happened.

“Did you get shot?” I lean in, my stomach twisting. “You have an arrowhead stuck in your shoulder.” It’s not big, but it’s there, wedged deep enough to make me wince just looking at it.

He tries to shrug, though it only brings another wince. “It’s fine.”

My fingers hover near the wound, hesitation building. I’ve never dealt with anything more serious than scrapes and bruises—and even those were my own. Well, except for that one time Chris nearly took off his thumb and we ended up racing to the hospital. But here? There’s no hospital. No quick fix. Just me and a man bleeding all over the place.

Hook catches my hesitation, his eyes glinting with amusement despite the pain. “You planning to stare it into submission, or are you actually going to pull it out?”

I resist the urge to smack him. Tempting, but no. “Do we have anything to actually get it out? A first aid kit or something?”

He reaches down to his boot, wincing as he retrieves a knife, and hands it to me. Strain etches his face, but his smirk doesn’t waver. “Use this. Pour the Starfrost on it to sanitise.” He nods toward the fireplace, where an iron poker leans against the hearth. “Then heat that up. You’ll need it to seal the wound once you’re done.”

I glance at the blade, then back at him. My stomach twists tighter. “You’ve done this before?”

His expression softens, but there's a shadow behind it. "Let's just say it's not my first time, love. You'll do fine."

Right. No pressure. Just digging metal out of a pirate's shoulder with a knife and a bottle of god-knows-what. Nothing could possibly go wrong.

My stomach flips uneasily at the thought. "I'm not burning you."

"You'll have to. I can't exactly reach over and do it myself." He pauses, then takes the bottle back from me, lifting it to his lips. He takes a long swig, not even flinching, and when he's done, he lets out a deep sigh, handing it back. "Alright. Do it."

I take a steadying breath, gripping the knife with trembling fingers. The arrowhead glints just beneath a thin layer of blood-soaked skin, sharp and deep. "Alright," I murmur, mostly to myself. Placing my free hand on his shoulder to steady him, I try to focus. His skin is warm, solid in a way that's unnervingly distracting. But I don't think about that.

He watches me through the mirror, his gaze locked on mine, his jaw clenched in readiness. As the tip of the knife presses into the wound, he grunts, his knuckles turning white as he grips the edge of the basin. Blood wells up—thick and dark—and I bite down on my lip, pushing aside the coil of nausea tightening in my stomach as I carefully work the blade in deeper, trying to get under the end of the arrow.

His breathing grows shallow, tense. A low curse slips from his lips, but he doesn't move. Not an inch.

"Almost there," I murmur, my voice steady, though it doesn't feel steady. My heart pounds loud and heavy in my chest. I shift the knife slightly, pressing down just enough to lever the arrowhead up. He sucks in a sharp breath through his teeth, his eyes squeezing shut as the pain radiates through him.

Finally, with a sickening wet sound, the arrowhead pulls free. Blood flows faster now, slicking my fingers as I remove it completely. "There," I say, exhaling shakily.

"The poker," he rasps, his voice rough. "Staunch the bleeding."

I don't even pause to think about it. I grab the poker, the iron heavy in my trembling hands, and press it toward the wound. The sizzle is instant, sharp and angry, as it meets his skin. He grunts, his grip tightening on the basin until his knuckles are stark white. I don't breathe, don't blink, until it's over.

When I pull the poker away, the wound is sealed beneath the heat.

He exhales sharply, his head dipping forward for a second, eyes shut, his face etched with pain he's clearly trying to shrug off. But then he straightens, his mouth quirking with a bravado that slips back into place like a mask. "Good job," he says, his voice hoarse but steady.

Without another word, he grabs the bottle of Starfrost from the table, takes a long pull, and heads straight for the bed. His steps are slower, a touch unsteady, but he manages to fall back onto the mattress, letting out a sigh that's far too contented for a man who just had a red-hot poker shoved against his shoulder.

I cross my arms, raising an eyebrow as he stretches out like he owns the place. "That's it? We're done?"

"Yep. Time to eat and rest before the sun comes up."

I stare at him for a long, hard moment, stuck where I am because, really, I have no idea what to say. "You're sleeping in the bed?"

He raises a brow. "Yes?"

"I'm not sharing with you."

Another long drink, another shrug. "Suit yourself, love." He nods toward the floor. "Plenty of room down there."

I glare at him, then at the floor. "Or, I could leave."

There's something about the way he grins at me, something maddeningly smug. Something I definitely don't like. Or maybe I do. Which is worse. My hormones betray me because, apparently, they're those of a fifteen-year-old girl, and he's lying there—shirtless, bleeding, yet somehow infuriatingly self-assured.

He reaches into his pocket, pulls out the key to the room, and dangles it lazily. "I'm not really sure that's an option, love."

I put my hands on my hips, narrowing my eyes. "You're keeping me prisoner in this room?"

He leans back against the headboard, resting the bottle on his very fine hip. "The mirror said you were the key. I need to get Neverland's magic back. It's not so much that you're a prisoner. I'm just... not letting you leave."

Chapter Thirty-Four

HOOK

THE KNOCK on the door is soft, a tentative sound in the otherwise quiet room. I watch as Alice glances over at me, clearly expecting me to move. Instead, I lounge on the bed, one arm propped behind my head, bottle in hand, a picture of pure indifference. She scowls, her eyes flicking to my face as though waiting for some chivalrous gesture. Amusing, really—she ought to know better by now.

“Oh, I’ll get it, then, shall I?”

She moves to open the door, and I shift just enough to watch her reaction. A young woman stands there, carrying a tray piled with food and a small bundle of clothes. The girl’s eyes fixate on Alice with an intensity I recognise all too well, something like awe, or even reverence. Wonderland folk are odd that way..

Alice doesn’t notice, of course. She takes the bundle of clothes offered to her—some fine red dress with lace, far nicer than what you’d expect in a place like this. I note the slight reluctance in the girl’s gaze, as though she’s parting with something precious. Interesting.

“Thank you,” Alice says, her voice softer than usual, almost respectful. She’s taken by the gesture, and I can’t resist the flash of amusement that sparks within me. She may act the cynic, but there’s a sliver of her that’s still wide-eyed. She keeps trying to snuff it out, but it’s there all the same.

The girl leaves, casting Alice one last odd look before she disappears down the hall. Alice closes the door, and for a brief moment, there’s

silence except for the crackling fire. I let my gaze settle on her, amused at the way she's standing there, clutching the dress as though it might burn her.

I tug the tray toward me, lifting the silver lid. The odd assortment of Wonderland foods gleam under the candlelight: honeyed bread, a plate of biscuits dusted with some silvery powder, and berries so dark they're almost black. There's cheese too, flecked with strange blue-green hues, and meat swimming in a dark, rich gravy. It's all peculiar, distinctly Wonderland, and entirely inviting—if you're not the cautious type.

"Want some?" I ask, popping a berry into my mouth, eyebrow raised in a deliberate challenge.

She folds her arms, looking suspiciously at the tray. "Do I look like I have a death wish? I value my insides, thanks."

I shrug, grinning. "Suit yourself. More for me." I tear off a piece of bread, dunking it into the gravy, and savour the way her gaze flickers to it despite herself. Her stomach grumbles, loud enough that even she can't ignore it. "You know, I can hear your stomach from here," I say, breaking off another piece of bread and holding it out. "Eat."

She eyes it, reluctant, but her mouth is practically watering. Instead, she mumbles, "I could really use a coffee right now," her voice barely hiding her need for a distraction.

I roll my eyes. "Listen to yourself, princess. 'Oh, I could use a coffee right now,'" I mimic, lightening my voice into a ridiculous caricature of her own. Her eyes narrow, but I catch the faintest twitch of her lips. "Just eat the bread." I offer her the bottle from earlier. "And drink. We've got a good five hours before sunrise."

She snatches the bread and casts a wary glance at the bottle. The way her eyes dart from the bottle to my mouth as I tip it back and take a hearty swig doesn't escape me. She tries to hide it, but I can tell she's watching me, more than she'd like to admit. My lips curl as I lower the bottle, letting the flicker of a smirk dance on my mouth, just for her.

With a huff, she grabs the dress and makes for the bathroom. "I'm taking a shower. And I'm getting out of this dress before I freeze."

"Give me a shout if you need a hand," I call after her, knowing full well it'll annoy her. Her only response is to slam the door, but I don't miss the faint colour in her cheeks before she does. This is becoming a game—one I intend to keep playing.

Chapter Thirty-Five

ALICE

IN THE SMALL BATHROOM, I stand for a good long moment, staring at myself in the mirror. It's just me. The same person I've always been. My long blonde hair is coming loose from my ponytail, sticking to my skin. I pull it free, running my fingers through it and gathering it back up. I press my palms to my cheeks, taking a breath as I mutter to myself, "This is all just a dream. A strange, twisted dream."

The thought of slapping myself awake crosses my mind, but I dismiss it, glancing instead at the cast-iron taps and shower head hooked over the old bath. I'd love nothing more than to sink into that bath and let the world disappear, but with Hook just outside, I'm not exactly keen on being defenceless and... exposed. A quick shower will have to do.

The moment I turn the tap and hot water cascades out, I nearly sob with relief. Wonderland or not, a decent shower feels like a small miracle. I take my time, letting the warmth chase away the icy ache in my bones. When I'm done, I slip on the dress, marvelling at the soft, delicate fabric and feeling a pang of guilt. This must have cost the girl a fortune.

I glance at myself in the cracked mirror, watching the lace pattern hug my shoulders and arms, casting intricate shadows in the dim light. The dress—a deep, rich red bodice laced with black over a flowing red skirt—somehow seems to belong here, fitting this dark, strange place. And, inexplicably, so do I.

The dress is stunning, almost like something out of a fairy tale. Only problem is, I can't reach the back to fasten it. With a sigh, clutching the front of the dress together, I open the bathroom door and step back into the room. Hook is sprawled on the bed, looking entirely too pleased with himself, watching me as if I'm the best show he's ever seen.

"Can't get it fastened," I admit, doing my best to sound nonchalant, though my pulse quickens at the thought of him coming that close.

His annoying expression softens, turning darker as he sits up, his eyes sharpening with a glint that's both intense and infuriating. Rising, he moves slowly, gaze sweeping over me from head to toe, lingering on the bare skin my hands can't quite cover.

"Turn around," he says, his voice softer but edged with something that sends a shiver right down to my bones. Damn. Bloody Captain Hook.

I turn, feeling his presence behind me, close enough that his warmth is unmistakable despite the chill in the air. His fingers graze my shoulders as he gathers the ties, lingering a moment longer than necessary.

"Hold still," he murmurs, voice low and intimate. My breath catches as he pulls the laces tighter, his knuckles brushing against my bare back. His hands move with a steady confidence, a roughness in his touch that hints at something darker beneath his charm. Each tug draws me closer to him, his breath warm against my ear, and I fight the urge to lean back, to let myself fall into his warmth. But I hold still, spine straight, keeping my gaze fixed forward even as my heart races.

Finally, he knots the laces, his hands settling at my waist, fingers pressing into the fabric as if reluctant to let go. He leans in, his breath warm against my neck as he whispers, "Perfect fit."

The heat from his hands lingers as he steps back, and when I turn to face him, there's something unreadable and intense in his eyes. "Thank you," I manage, trying to keep my voice steady.

I turn to the tray he's set on the table, more to distract myself than anything. Picking up a piece of bread, I take a bite, just for something to do with my hands. Hook sits back on the bed, his gaze following me, a smug smile still playing on his lips.

"Are you actually going to eat that?" he asks, eyebrow raised.

I pull off a piece and pop it into my mouth. It's unexpectedly delicious, warm and soft with a hint of sweetness, almost like it's buttered, though

it's not. I take another bite, hoping he doesn't notice the way my expression softens. Of course, he does. That damn cocky grin is back.

"Not so bad, is it?" he teases.

I huff, finishing the piece and reaching for the bottle of that strange, shimmering blue liquid the bartender called Starfrost. I take a sip, feeling the cool, sweet taste slide down my throat, warming me from the inside out. "It's... not terrible," I admit, setting the bottle back down.

"Well," he says, gaze locked on me, "if you say so." And there's something in his tone, in the way he's looking at me, that makes me think he's not talking about the drink. My cheeks flush, and I feel an inexplicable heat rising up my neck. Oh, for the love of—

I draw a steadying breath and walk over to the window, turning away from him to collect myself. The glass is dusty, but I can just about make out the night outside. Behind me, the room falls silent, thick with an unspoken tension that lingers, just on the edge of dangerous.

The river glimmers dark and still under the mist, stretching so far that I can't see its end. Everything around it seems caught in some twisted state, like it's dead but still clawing at life, black vines curling over every surface, refusing to let go. The place looks more like something decayed and haunting than anything I remember about Wonderland, though I can't quite say I remember much about Wonderland in the first place.

Just yesterday I was in my mother's kitchen. Or was it hours ago? Days? I close my eyes and try to ground myself, to recall something simple, like the steady hum of the fridge or the feeling of my fingers running over the cards. I wonder if they're looking for me now, if it's even possible to search for someone who's somehow dropped into an entirely different world.

My last visit to Wonderland, I was a child. Time was so strange here, and I can barely remember how it passed—days, weeks maybe. When I finally returned, I didn't even remember coming back through the tree. It was like one minute I was here, and the next I just... woke up, as if I'd been spat back into my own world. Easy enough for Mum to convince me it was all just a wild dream.

Except I knew better. I'd told Grace right away, but she'd dismissed it as nonsense, as she always did. They both said my head was in the clouds. Only Dad and Gran listened. I was obsessed for weeks after, searching that garden for a way back, begging to visit the tree again. Mum had grown so

tired of hearing it that she'd threatened to chop it down if I kept on. And that was that—the door to Wonderland had been sealed shut.

I blink away the memories and glance towards the battered old chair by the fireplace. I sit down, curling up with my knees tucked under my chin. The chair's upholstery is scratchy, and the springs dig into my back no matter how much I shift. I lean back, trying to find some semblance of comfort, but it's impossible. Every tiny movement sends another jolt of discomfort through me, reminding me I'm anything but relaxed. With Hook's even breathing in the background, I'm painfully aware of every creak, every twitch of the old chair as it protests under my weight.

After a few minutes, the chill from the room settles through the thin upholstery, and I suppress a shiver, drawing my arms tighter around myself. This is ridiculous. The bed is right there, warm and inviting, but sharing it with him feels... complicated. Yet, as I glance at the hard lines of the chair pressing into my sides, I realise the stubbornness isn't worth it. Just to be warm, I tell myself, ignoring the flutter in my chest as I stand and tiptoe across the room.

Quietly, I move toward the bed, slipping under the blanket at the very edge, just close enough to feel a hint of warmth but not so close that he'd notice.... I turn on my side, facing him, pulling the blanket up and settling as best as I can without disturbing him.

I lie still, listening to the steady rhythm of his breathing, watching the way his chest rises and falls, the flickering shadows dancing across his face.

Then, without warning, his eyes open, and he catches me looking. A slow, sleepy smile curves across his lips, and he murmurs, voice low and teasing, "Well, Princess, you've found your way to my side after all."

Chapter Thirty-Six

HOOK

THE FIRST STREAKS of dawn filter through the dusty windows, casting an odd, silvery light across the room. I've been awake for hours—or it feels that way. Every sound, every creak had me alert, my fingers curled around the knife under my pillow. Old habits and all that.

Alice lies beside me, fast asleep, curled on her side with a few loose strands of hair catching the eerie light. She'd almost look peaceful if it weren't for the occasional flicker of unease on her face, as if whatever bothers her in this place has slipped into her dreams as well.

The fire's down to embers, casting a faint warmth that keeps the morning chill at bay. The room feels calm, that perfect temperature that makes me loathe to leave the bed. But dawn's creeping in, along with the unsettling sounds that mark daybreak in Wonderland. I know it's only a matter of time before the Queen's minions start scouring the land for us again. With daylight on their side, they'll be combing through every last shadow, and I'm certain the Queen won't rest until we're found.

Alice stirs, her expression finally softening, her brow relaxing. Watching her, anyone might think she's innocent. But I know better. Women like her are rare. That sweetness of hers? It has thorns. Still, watching her now—unknowing, vulnerable—I feel something that shouldn't be there. Something as aggravating as it is dangerous.

Before I dwell too much on it, I slip my shirt on, carefully working it over my wounded shoulder, the sting of it a reminder of our narrow

escape. Shrugging into my coat, I run my fingers over the worn leather. It's not my coat, not the one I'd grown accustomed to, but it'll do for now. With my knife secured at my belt, I pause for a moment at the door, glancing back at Alice. "*Rest a little longer, Princess,*" I murmur, slipping out quietly to head down the stairs.

The tavern feels different from last night. It's alive in a way it hadn't been before. The ghostly patrons are now almost solid, their forms filled with a faint glow. Laughter rolls across the room, rich and strange, and as I step in, every face turns, eyes following me.

"Always a party down here?" I stretch my arms, taking in the odd stares they're giving me. The room falls quiet. Every figure—nearly alive and yet not quite—fixes me with a gaze teetering between curiosity and reverence, as if they're sizing me up for reasons I can't guess.

"The lady sleeps?" Merrik asks, his tone as formal as if he were asking after a queen.

"She does," I reply, keeping my expression neutral.

"And you, sir, did you sleep well?" He asks it like it's a script, as if my answer were already known to him.

"Sound as can be." I catch his eyes, sharp with curiosity. "Is there food available this fine morning?"

A knowing smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. "Of course, sir." He pauses. "Shall I have food sent up for the lady?"

"No, she'll be down soon." I shake my head, moving towards the main door. Dawn's light trickles through two tall windows, casting warped, glimmering shapes across the floorboards. As I step closer, the shadows seem to shift, like ripples in dark water.

The girl from last night—the one who brought food and clothes—is sitting at a corner table, sketching something on a tattered scrap of parchment. Her eyes flick between the paper and me, her lower lip caught between her teeth. I don't need to look twice to know what she's drawing. The dark coat, the red dress, the golden hair—it's unmistakably us. She tilts her work away, a blush crossing her cheeks, as if she'd been caught with something private.

"So," I begin, casting a broad glance around the room, "you lot all come back to life in the daytime, is that how this works?"

There's a ripple of uneasy glances. Brows knit in confusion, patrons exchange wary looks. One man fiddles with the cuff of his jacket; another

leans in, muttering something to his neighbour.

“Not exactly,” the girl whispers, but she doesn’t elaborate, and I don’t push. Fair enough.

“Tell me,” I continue, letting my gaze settle back on her, “have you seen a man from my world? Short fellow, bit of a round belly, fumbles more often than not—loyal to a fault. Goes by the name Smee.”

A few of them shift uncomfortably. The girl’s gaze drops to her sketch, her lips pressing together tightly. A man across the room mutters under his breath, his tone just shy of a warning.

“No,” the girl finally says, her voice almost too quick, “we haven’t seen anyone like that.”

I’m about to press her when a commotion at the far side of the room catches my attention. A huddle of patrons has gathered around a table, their focus entirely fixed on a strange, chameleon-like creature skittering across the tabletop. Its body shifts colours rapidly, blending with the background before darting to another spot, nearly vanishing altogether. One of the patrons lunges with a netted stick, only for the creature to slip just out of reach, letting out a haunting, almost mocking shriek.

I watch, intrigued, as another player lunges, his hand just grazing its tail before it twists away again. Frustrated sighs and muttered curses rise from the table as the creature evades them, one move after another.

“What exactly are they doing?” I ask, gesturing at the peculiar spectacle.

Merrik raises an eyebrow, glancing over at the game with mild amusement. “They’re playing *Catch the Caterpillar*,” he replies, as though that should explain everything.

“Right,” I say, watching the creature dart away yet again. “Is there a point to this, or do they just chase it around for the fun of it?”

Merrik’s mouth twists in a wry smile. “Oh, there’s always a point,” he murmurs. “But the caterpillar’s slippery—never stays caught for long.” He shrugs. “The impossible is just a matter of patience.”

“Sounds maddening. I’d wager half the thrill is in the failure.”

The girl keeps her eyes down on her sketches, fingers busy shading in details, while I survey the room and the odd spectacle unfolding around me. Just then, one of the patrons lunges at the chameleon-like caterpillar—misses by a mile, naturally—and stumbles right into the girl’s table.

Idiot. Her sketches scatter across the floorboards, and she scrambles to gather them. And I, being the gentleman, go to help her.

She has a surprising number, all hastily done yet brimming with detail. As I flip through them, my fingers grazing over each page, something stills my movement—a sketch, just peeking out of the stack, catches my eye. I pause, my breath hitching, and carefully slip it free. It's a portrait drawn in soft, almost tender strokes, yet the faces are unmistakable.

Two faces.

My mother's gaze stares up at me from the page—gentle, knowing, as though she could see right into my soul. And beside her, a boy with wide, innocent eyes. Samuel.

The sight hits me in the chest, a cold rush that leaves me hollow. It feels as if the ground beneath me tilts, and for a heartbeat, the world around us narrows down to just this fragile piece of paper. The memory. The past. Alive in this sketch, so vivid it almost breathes.

“What is this?” My voice, once steady, now drops into something rough and sharp, the question tumbling out before I can stop myself. Dangerous, accusing. I hold the sketch just out of her reach, fingers tightening as if afraid to let go, even as my stomach churns with unease. “How do you have this?”

She freezes. I watch as her eyes widen, a flicker of something—fear, regret—crossing her features. Her gaze darts away, lips pressing into a tight, trembling line, refusing to meet mine. She looks cornered, like a bird caught in a snare, each breath quickening.

“Tell me,” I demand. I step closer, closing the distance, my pulse pounding. The paper quivers slightly in my hand. “How do you have this?”

She shrinks back, her whole body folding in on itself. Her arms wrap around her knees, holding tight. She sinks further into the chair, her gaze lowering, her mouth refusing to form words. The silence stretches, charged, aching, clawing at my patience until my chest feels tight, suffocating.

The room feels smaller, the air thick with tension. I can feel her trembling beneath her defiance, her fear like a pulse just beneath the surface. The image of Samuel—his innocent eyes staring back at me from the page—burns itself deeper, a ghost that doesn't fade, a wound that never quite closed.

"Say something," I whisper, my voice strained, cracking under the weight of everything unsaid.

I open my mouth to push her further, to tear the truth out of her, but the echo of footsteps from the stairs cuts through the room. I glance up, my eyes narrowing as Alice descends, her hair loose in waves, her chin lifted defiantly. Even after last night's chaos, she looks annoyingly composed. Perfect, almost.

I take one last look at the sketch, then tuck it into my pocket, slipping my usual mask back on, the corner of my mouth twitching—almost a smile. I shove down the images clawing at my mind, refusing to let them control me. Not now. Not in front of her.

"Good morning, princess," I say.

"Stop calling me that," she snaps, her brow arching as her gaze sweeps the room, taking in the strange faces, the tension.

Before she can say anything else, and as if I planned it, one of the patrons jumps up, pulling a chair and setting it at the table in front of her, bowing almost clumsily. Another scrambles to ensure her seat is comfortable, like she's some kind of royalty. Alice blinks, her confusion there for just a split second before she hides it, her face smoothing into indifference.

"Enjoying the welcome?" I say, sliding into the seat across from her, my eyes never leaving hers.

She glares at me, her jaw tightening, the edge of uncertainty still there, just beneath her anger. And damn if that doesn't make it all the more entertaining.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

ALICE

I WAKE ALONE in the bed, the sheets still warm from where Hook had been. His absence feels... odd. Strange how quickly I've got used to his irritating presence. I figure he's gone downstairs, though a small part of me wonders if he's left entirely. The room is empty except for our discarded clothes from last night—my ruined dress hanging limply over a chair, his tattered shirt tossed aside.

I take my time getting ready, smoothing out the red dress the girl brought me and running my fingers through my tangled hair. Not that I care too much how I look. It's just... practical. I make the bed, straighten the room. It's nice and warm in here, a comfort I'm sure we'll have to leave soon enough. There's no way the Queen will let last night's little escapade go unpunished. I'm surprised she hasn't turned up here already. If I were the Queen, that's exactly what I'd have done. Logically, if someone escaped into the water outside my palace, I'd be searching all the stops along the way, and this was the first one. Maybe that was foolish on our part.

The stairs creak under my feet as I leave the room and head downstairs. Something feels different. The air. It's thick with a strange energy, raising goosebumps along my arms. I pause at the entrance, taking in the scene until my gaze lands on him.

Hook is standing at the other side of the tavern, close to the door, talking to the girl who brought up our food and clothes. He glances up, his

gaze immediately finding mine, but even here, something's off.

It's not just him, though. It's everyone, it's the place. The guests from last night, who'd been little more than hazy figures, are now... perfect. There's a soft glow to their skin; it's like they're lit from within, and their faces... they're flawless. It's beautiful, deep and unsettling.

Hook strides towards me. "Good morning, Princess," he says.

I already want to kill him. "Stop calling me that." I make my way across the room, and before I can get very far, one of the patrons practically leaps out of his seat, pulling my chair out for me, almost bowing. Another follows suit, fussing over the table, ensuring I have a comfortable seat. They murmur things I can't quite catch, their words clipped, strange.

Hook is watching me. "Enjoying the welcome?"

"What are they doing?"

He lifts a brow, clearly amused and sits down. I hate him. "Serving your breakfast?"

"Don't be a smartarse. Why?" I put my hand up. "Wait, don't answer that."

The table is set, food and tea being brought out to me—to us. Stacks of it, like a grand buffet. The table is filled with food—eggs, toast, tea. Hook wastes no time with them. He grabs a plate and starts piling things on. There's bacon, sausages, some meats I have no idea about, biscuits. He's digging in.

One man bows as he sets down a teapot in front of me.

"Thank you," I say, reaching for it.

But a spark jumps between my fingers and the handle—actual blue light dancing in the air. The room goes dead silent, all eyes fixed on me. "Static," I mumble, bringing my hand back to my lap, rubbing my fingertips together, where they feel like they're vibrating.

This is just great. I hate attention. I go for the toast instead, placing a piece on my plate, and the moment I reach for the butter, someone hands me the small dish, curls of butter softened just the right amount. I spread it on the toast. Now I know how goldfish feel—I'm on display, and I'm not sure why.

I take a bite, savouring the warmth, the taste, like I haven't eaten in days. But I hold back any appreciative sounds because Hook's watching me, his gaze sharp, and I know him well enough by now to tell he's

waiting for a reaction. One hint of pleasure and he'd be ready with some barbed comment.

He cuts into a slice of something that vaguely resembles bacon, though it smells... different. Tempting, but not quite right.

"Why is everyone staring at me?" I whisper, leaning closer to him. But before he can answer, a young girl skips over, her voice sing-song: "It's you. You came to help us, didn't you? You'll defeat the Queen."

"Save Wonderland."

"End the decay."

"She's not the one..."

"She'll make things right..."

My words catch in my throat. I want to tell them I can't, I won't. I don't even know how. But something in me can't say it. And Hook—I swear to God, I could... he stares at me, and he's just smiling, amused, annoyingly amused.

It doesn't matter, though. I don't get time to say anything, because a large, portly man comes from somewhere else in the room, adjusting his monocle with a precise, almost fussy gesture. He's round, his waistcoat strained over his belly, his attire reminiscent of some Victorian caricature, his expression laced with disdain.

"Well, well, isn't this quaint?" he sneers at me, casting a low, judgmental gaze over me.

I frown at him.

"Our little hero, finally gracing us with her presence." He looks me up and down like he has the right to, and honestly, what am I supposed to say to this? I could tell him where to shove it, to get lost, right?

"I beg your pardon?"

"You're late. You're always late. Late, late, late. That's the trouble." His smile is thin, his eyes narrow. He sniffs, looking down his nose at me in a way that makes me want to knock that monocle off his smug face.

I take a breath. I will not let this man get under my skin.

"Yes, she's late," he insists.

"Very, very late."

"Well, if someone told me what I was late for..." I lean back, fold my arms.

The man gasps dramatically. "The audacity. It's not what you're late for, but that you are late."

“So I’m not late for anything?”

“No, you’re late for everything.”

“And everything is...?”

“The thing that is everywhere. You’re late.”

Hook stifles a laugh, and I kick him under the table. It only makes his grin grow even wider, his eyes bright with infuriating challenge. He shifts in his seat, not even a flinch, as he stands and reaches into his coat to pull out something small and ornate. It’s a compass, worn and old, the edges etched with strange patterns, the glass slightly warped, catching the light in odd ways. He flips it open, and the needle spins erratically, whirling like it’s lost its mind, before it stills and points... directly at me.

“Yes, she is late, isn’t she.” He pats the man on the shoulder. “You just can’t get the people these days.”

“Is that broken, then?” I ask.

He snaps it shut, bringing his full attention back to the room, back to me. “It’s not broken. It’s just not working.” He comes around to me. “Perhaps we should be heading out, Princess. We can’t sit around here all morning eating breakfast. Not when you’re already late.” He pulls my chair back, shoves his hand under my arm, and hoists me up, giving me no time to protest. “I’ll make sure she’s on time next time.”

I go to push him back—honestly, the lot of them—but the girl from last night slips through the crowd, moving as easily as if she’s part of the shadows. She’s clutching a piece of parchment, which she places on the table in front of us, her wide eyes darting between us both before she gives a small, uncertain bow. Like we’re supposed to make sense of it.

Hook is the first to reach for the parchment. “What is it?” I ask, watching him as he carefully lifts it, turning it this way and that. It’s instantly clear—a map, crudely drawn, with strange landmarks scattered across it. There’s a forest that looks suspiciously tangled and overgrown, a twisted river, and a looping ‘X’ marking one small, ominous spot.

The girl leans in, her voice soft, almost a whisper. “A path to the heart of Wonderland, miss. To a place where things are... hidden.” Her hand flies to her mouth as if she’s said too much, as if that single word, *hidden*, slipped past her defences.

“Hidden?” I glance at Hook, who’s still examining the map, his gaze sharp with a new intensity, that dangerous spark of intrigue lighting up his expression.

The girl nods, dropping her voice even lower. “It’s where you need to go, but you’ll have to be quick. The Queen watches... she knows.” With that, she presses her lips together and darts back into the crowd, vanishing before either of us can ask anything more.

The Queen. Always her shadow hanging over us. “If the Queen’s watching, then why hasn’t she found us here?” I ask Hook, unable to shake the feeling that we’re being toyed with.

The barkeep’s voice drifts over, his tone oddly calm. “The Queen cannot see this place.”

I nearly forgot he was there, he’s been so quiet and still. “Can’t see it? What do you mean?”

He wipes down the bar with deliberate slowness, his gaze flicking up to me, an odd glimmer of pity in his eyes. “What is said is not to be spoken,” he murmurs cryptically, and for all its simplicity, it gives me chills. Then he nods towards the bar, where an egg timer has appeared, its sands slipping downward.

“That... wasn’t there before,” I murmur, moving closer. Inside the glass is an unsettling image—me, but as a child, head bowed in an eerie stillness, and sand rising halfway up, trapping me.

I feel Hook’s presence beside me, his eyes fixed on the timer. His shoulder brushes against mine, a warm, steady weight, but he doesn’t say a word.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

HOOK

THE MAP SPRAWLS across the table, a mess of angles and lines that looks neat enough at first glance, but it's tangled with enough nonsense to leave my head spinning. As I spread it out, hoping that seeing it laid before me might reveal something more sensible, Alice leans in close—so close I can feel the warmth of her breath on my neck. Merrik's lot bustle around, clearing the table, but I snap my hand down over a plate piled with bread and meat.

"Leave this one," I say, giving them a hard look, and they pause. I might be full, but who knows when we'll get our next meal.

"So," Alice starts, edging even closer, "what does the map say to you?"

I arch a brow. "The map doesn't talk, love."

She rolls her eyes, but she's not discouraged. "Yes, I realise that, but you can read it, can't you?"

"Darling, I've been reading maps since I was yay high to a grasshopper." I raise the map and tilt my head, watching her expression as she follows every movement.

"Good," she says, hands planted on her hips. "Then what does this one tell you?"

I sigh and let my shoulders drop, eyeing the parchment with a growing frustration. Every time I look away and back, I'm convinced something on it shifts—just a fraction, just enough to throw me off. Ignoring Alice's

closeness, I scan the lines and symbols again, tracing them with my finger. She's practically breathing down my neck now.

She points to the X with a jab of her finger. "That's where we need to go?"

I pull the map just out of her reach, smirking as her gaze narrows. "Seems that way." If she keeps glaring like that, she'll end up with creases across that pretty face. "Perhaps leave the map reading to me."

She lets out a huff, her eyes flashing, clearly seconds away from saying something cutting. Instead, I turn to the girl who handed me the map. She watches us both with a bright-eyed intensity that's a touch unsettling. Seeing her properly now, she couldn't be more than seventeen.

I jab a finger at the X. "What's here? Why'd you mark this spot?"

She hesitates, her gaze fixed on the X like she's carefully picking her words. "The answer... to what you seek," she says softly.

"The Queen stole Neverland's magic—that's what I'm here for. It's here?" I study her face, wondering if she knows. Back in Neverland, they'd have called her a 'seer.' Her kind see things, but rarely are their visions accurate. They're mixed with fragments that don't make sense—a mess in their heads, enough to drive anyone mad. I have no choice in this instance to assume what she sees is what I need. There is nothing else to go on.

"The Queen's taken magic from every realm," Merrik cuts in, voice low. "Everything she can lay her hands on."

I nod, biting back a retort. I'd seen that—the mirrors, the shadows, her twisted games. I glance around the bar, taking in every face, every expression. Each one is etched with raw, desperate hope, clinging to something they think we can offer them. It makes my skin crawl. I'm no one's saviour.

But Alice... She's watching me too, her gaze wavering between suspicion and something softer. She's watching the girl, searching her face. "Where exactly is this?" she presses. "How do we get there?"

The girl stares back, eyes wide with something close to fear. She hesitates, glancing down before finally saying, "There are... we..." Her hand flies to her mouth, and the colour drains from her.

Merrik clears his throat, leaning in close, his voice low. "We can't speak of certain things, nor certain places," he says, casting a wary glance at the doors. "To whisper about such things is an act of treason." He leans in even closer, voice dropping to a hush. "The Queen has eyes and ears

everywhere. To speak of such things would bring her wrath down on us all.”

I nod, biting back any further questions. I’ve seen enough of the Queen’s brand of ‘wrath’ to know that his warning isn’t an exaggeration.

My eyes drift back to the map. From what I can tell, each line, curve, and symbol marks a different path—paths that all twist back on themselves, looping into one another. And every single one seems to end in a dead end. A hundred different ways to get nowhere. I’m not even sure which way to go.

“Is that your grand plan, then?” she snaps, stepping closer. “To stare it into submission?”

My jaw clenches, but I don’t look up. She’s baiting me, and damn if I’m not tempted to bite.

I lift my head slowly, letting my gaze settle on her. She’s standing there with her arms crossed, chin tipped up, and I can feel everyone else’s eyes shifting to her too.

“In your world,” I reply, voice low, “are you used to having everyone else do everything for you?”

Her mouth sets in a hard line, a spark of challenge lighting her gaze. “You know nothing about me.”

“No,” I say, turning back to the map and leaning in as if I could bore a hole straight through it. “But I don’t need to.”

Every path looks like it’ll take us two days’ walk at best, but there’s no way to know. Behind me, I can feel her glare searing into the back of my neck.

The thing is, while I’m studying the map, the people around us aren’t just staring. They’re subtle in their movements, but they keep offering Alice things—a chair, another chair, something to eat, a drink. Two of them actually bow to her. I catch the flicker of confusion—and irritation—in her eyes as she tries to peer over my shoulder.

“Why don’t you have a seat, Princess? Let the men do the work,” I say. I can practically feel her anger from across the table.

“If you don’t stop calling me Princess, I’m going to—”

But she’s cut off when the fat, pompous bloke from before—the one who looks like he swallowed a whole pumpkin—sidles up with that self-important look, hands clasped behind his back. He actually nudges Alice aside, as if she’s in his way.

“Excuse me?” she snaps, eyes flashing, trying to get around him.

I look up at her, feigning innocence. “You’re excused.”

The man clears his throat, puffing himself up, and turns his gaze to the map. “Ah, you’re seeking the swiftest path, I presume?”

“You presume correctly,” I reply, throwing Alice a wink as she shoots me the angriest, most fiery glare I’ve seen yet.

He chuckles, indulgent, and peers down at the map as if it’s some child’s scribble. “Well, as we say in Wonderland ... the fastest route is rarely the quickest way, and the quickest way often isn’t the fastest.”

Alice fights her way back to the table, nearly elbowing her way in as someone hands her a small jacket, and another, bizarrely, offers her a large vase. She scowls, her patience clearly thin. “That ... makes absolutely no sense.”

He raises a hand as though to silence her, his beady eyes never leaving the map. “Should you require guidance, simply ask for directions from those who have no idea where they’re going. They often know the way.”

I sweep a hand across the map. “There you go, Princess. Just ask for directions. Maybe try to be a bit more constructive, hmm?”

Her scowl deepens. “I swear to god, I could kill you right now.”

“And many have tried, Princess, yet here I am, and where are they?”

“My lady requires a sword?” one of the patrons offers, holding up what looks like an old, well-worn blade, his hands rough and calloused from work—a blacksmith, by the looks of him.

Alice’s eyes light up, and she raises a brow. “Actually, yes, I would. A sword, and then I’ll run you through.”

Alice manages to push through the crowd, and people part for her with strange reverence. A woman curtseys in front of her, and Alice, with only a slight nod, acknowledges it before she makes her way to the other side of the table, away from the pompous bloke, who doesn’t look pleased. I couldn’t care less. Let them stare. Let them do cartwheels if they want. I just need to figure out this map and find the bloody way out of here.

I lean over the map, hands braced on either side, studying it intently.

“You make it look so complicated,” Alice says, her voice dripping with exasperation. “Just head north, past... whatever that is.” She squints and leans in. “Is that a maze?”

I frown, glancing to where she’s pointing. There’s no maze there, just a series of hills. “Have you lost your mind? Do you need glasses? There’s no

maze.”

She shoots me a scathing look. “Have *you* lost your mind? It’s right there.” She jabs a finger at the spot.

I shake my head, still only seeing hills. “That is not a maze, Princess. That’s—”

“For the love of god, stop calling me that,” she snaps.

“Princess,” I say, just to rile her.

She rolls her eyes, crossing her arms. “Child.”

I smirk. “Do you practise being insufferable? Because believe me, you’re a natural. Might be the only thing you’re an expert in.”

She lets out a frustrated growl. “Do you practise being a pig? Because believe me, you’re top of the class.” And then, quick as anything, she snatches the map from under my nose. Holding it up, she jabs a finger at the spot. “Look, smartarse. *A maze.*”

I stare, and sure enough, there it is—a twisting, looming maze where before there’d been nothing but hills. “No... that wasn’t there before.”

A small woman beside us gasps, her eyes wide with awe. “She’s the right Alice. I told you. It’s her.” She elbows the person next to her.

The crowd erupts in murmurs, half excited, half doubtful.

“Not the wrong Alice,” another voice insists, as if trying to convince themselves.

The pompous bloke crosses his arms, shaking his head with disdain. “No, no, she’s definitely the wrong Alice. You’re all seeing what you want to see.”

An elderly man steps forward, his gaze flicking nervously to Alice. “The maze only appears for the true Alice,” he says, nodding slowly as if this settles the matter.

Around us, the crowd grows louder, some claiming she’s the right Alice, others muttering that she’s a fraud, each voice adding to the chaos.

I lean in close, lowering my voice just for her. “Guess you’re causing quite the stir, Princess.”

She narrows her eyes at me, her voice edged with venom. “I hate you. Do you know that?”

I laugh, letting my eyes linger on hers. “Oh, darling, you have no idea what your words do to me. I—”

But before I can finish, the main door slams open, and everyone falls silent, freezing in place. The slightly chaotic crowd—still in the middle of

their bowing, bickering, and fussing—stops as a man rushes in, wide-eyed.

“The Queen,” he pants, his voice laced with fear. “She’s coming. The guards—they’re heading this way.”

His words send a ripple of panic through the crowd, their arguments dissolving into a single, united fear. Merrik shoves his way through to us, his grip tight as he grabs Alice’s arm, urgency in his voice.

“Run, Alice. *Run*. Out the back door, now.”

Without a second thought, I grab her hand, pulling her with me as the crowd’s fearful whispers grow, and we head out the backdoor.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

ALICE

I'M PRETTY SURE some people are put on this earth just to drive you absolutely mad, and if we weren't running for our lives, I'd be certain that person, for me, is Hook. I thought my sister and mother could drive me to distraction, but him ... he's in a league of his own. I could so easily put a pillow over his head the next time he sleeps.

We're sprinting out the back door of the inn, and thank god I still have my trainers on and not some ridiculous shoes the Queen might have demanded I wear. She'd have no trouble catching me then—I'd be face-first in the grass with a broken leg. Grace is the graceful one in heels, not me. And even in trainers, this dress is a nightmare. I bunch it up as best I can, holding it tight to keep pace with Hook.

"Come on, love, keep up," he calls over his shoulder.

"You want to try running in a dress?" I snap back, out of breath.

The back of the inn opens onto a sprawling, bizarre field. The grass beneath our feet is an electric green, dotted with massive flowers the size of our heads, the colours too bright—red, purple, and blue petals practically glowing under a sky that can't decide if it's dusk or dawn. Every time I glance up, the colours shift, the clouds caught in a constant, impossible sunset.

Ahead, the path twists and turns in ways that make no sense. It looks like a straightforward trail, but the more I stare, the more it warps, looping back on itself, twisting into figure-eights and spirals, like the ground itself

is playing tricks on us. To the left, a stream bubbles alongside the path, but the water flows in jerky bursts, as if fighting against gravity. Large, round stepping stones float on its surface, each one hovering just inches above the water before splashing down, only to rise again.

And, of course, that's the way Hook's leading us.

I come to a halt at the water's edge as he leaps onto one of the floating stones, looking entirely too pleased with himself. "You've got to be kidding me," I say, eyeing the stones with a mix of dread and disbelief.

"You'd rather take the other path?" He nods toward the field on our right, where the grass glints ominously, like it's made of razor-sharp glass blades. "Or would you prefer to head back to the inn and greet the Queen's guards?"

I grit my teeth, glancing between the unsteady floating stones and the deadly grass. "If I fall in," I warn, fixing him with a hard look, "you're giving me your clothes. Be a gentleman for once."

His smirk widens as he takes another step forward, turning to face me with that infuriating confidence. "Oh, darling, I'd happily see you in my clothes. But I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for it."

"You're insufferable."

"So I've been told."

Ignoring his remark, I leap from the bank and land on the first stone. It bobs under my foot but holds just long enough for me to balance—until it doesn't. The shock of my landing keeps it steady for a second, and then it starts to dip. I have to spring to the next one before it sinks into the water. Each stone is the same, supporting me for mere seconds before dropping. I barely keep my footing, and I can feel Hook's gaze on me, no doubt amused.

We make it across to the other side, and I glance back, expecting to see the stones. They're gone, swallowed up by the water, leaving no trace of our path.

"Where did they—?"

"Doesn't matter," he says, his voice sharp. He nods back to where we came from, to the path. In the distance, a line of figures appears—armoured bodies, their metal glinting ominously in the sunlight.

"Guards," I mutter, heart racing. "Shit."

"Yep. Come on."

We sprint into the woods, and immediately, it's like stepping into a different world—one laced with a dark, magical beauty. The air here feels thick, almost alive, and everything around us is cast in deep, enchanting shades of purple. The trees themselves are massive, their twisted trunks dark and glistening as if coated in some faint, iridescent sheen. From the bark of a few, thick rivulets of dark purple sap leak, winding down like slow-moving blood.

Strange objects hang from the branches above, swaying softly despite the stillness in the air. Tiny glass bottles, glowing faintly, dangle from silver threads, their lights casting eerie reflections across the trees. Odd shapes, like shrunken lanterns and silver charms, twist on invisible wires, spinning lazily. As we pass beneath them, the faint glimmer of glittering dust drifts down, catching in my hair and on my skin.

The silence is unnerving—no birds, no rustling leaves, just an endless, heavy quiet that makes each of our footsteps seem louder than they should be. The ground is covered in thick, spongy moss, a midnight shade of purple, and every step we take feels like sinking into a strange, yielding softness.

Hook glances back at me, his face half-lit by the glow of the hanging charms. “Afraid, love?” His voice sounds almost too loud in the silence, but he doesn't seem to care.

I try to ignore the eerie beauty around us, but the forest feels like it's watching, its dark, glittering branches stretching out like hands, reaching to pull us deeper.

“No, I...” I lower my voice, but even that feels too loud, shattering the heavy silence. “It's so quiet.”

We've walked quite a way when I glance over my shoulder, but all I can see are endless trees and shadows. The stream we crossed is gone, swallowed by the woods, and there's no sign of the field or the guards. That's all right. Probably.

The further we venture, the thicker the air becomes, feeling ancient and damp, biting into my skin. I tug the small jacket tighter around my shoulders, grateful for even that small bit of warmth. Each step seems to pull us deeper into a darkness that's dense, almost tangible, a far cry from the daylight outside. The dim glow of the hanging charms fades, replaced by an unsettling dimness, the shadows stretching longer, twisting around us like silent watchers.

Hook strides ahead, entirely unbothered, while I have to hike my dress higher to keep from tripping over roots tangled with glittering moss. He glances back, and for a moment, I almost mistake his look for concern—but there's more in his eyes than just that. If he weren't such a jerk, he'd actually be... attractive. Not that I'm swooning over him. I mean, his dark hair and piercing eyes do absolutely nothing for me. Nothing at all.

I wonder if there's a Mrs Hook waiting somewhere in Neverland, which only makes me think of Chris and what he must be doing. I don't even know what day it is anymore. Did I miss Gran's funeral? I feel the thought should weigh on my heart, the pain of not getting to say goodbye, but I realise I'd said goodbye to her a long time ago.

The thought of her makes my chest ache, though, but not for the loss—more a sense of relief. She wasn't living anymore, just existing. My gran, the beautiful, strange, mysterious woman, had died long before her body gave in. If she'd known the indignity her illness would bring, she'd have told me to smother her. She'd have hated to see her own light dim that way, and I hated watching it, too. My mother and Grace never understood. Just like Dad. In our family, everything's always been divided in two. Grace had my mother and our aunt; I got my gran and our dad.

"Are you crying?" Hook's voice snaps me out of my thoughts, and I look up to see him watching me with a mixture of curiosity and amusement.

I swipe at my face, noticing the back of my hand coming away wet. I hadn't even realised I was crying. "No," I mutter, shrugging it off. "Must be some rain."

Hook stares at me for a long moment, and for a second, I think he might actually say something. There must be a million thoughts spinning around in that maddening head of his, but whatever he's about to say, he doesn't. He just nods and turns, carrying on ahead, leaving me to follow.

"This place doesn't feel right," I murmur, my voice almost too quiet for the dense silence around us. "It feels..." I trail off, shuddering as a strange sensation creeps along my skin, like something crawling, unseen. The air's so chilled that each breath we take turns into delicate wisps that vanish almost instantly. "Wrong."

"It's Wonderland, Princess. Nothing about it is right."

"I told you to stop—" But my words die on my lips as something flickers in my peripheral vision—a faint movement in the trees. I freeze,

watching the shadows shift, unable to shake the sense that something's watching us.

Before I can figure it out, Hook slows as well, his usual smirk fading as he scans the surroundings. We both pause, a deep chill seeping into my bones, and that's when I notice it—the trees have formed a perfect circle around us, their branches twisted together like the walls of some dark lair.

"Hook..." I whisper, every nerve in my body suddenly taut.

His eyes narrow, and he turns, but then he goes utterly still. Silken threads stretch from branch to branch, forming a web that surrounds us on all sides, and as I watch, horrified, I see them—dozens of enormous spiders descending silently from above. Their bodies are dark and gleaming, their many legs moving with eerie precision, and each thread shimmers faintly in the dim light, casting a ghostly glow as they close in, cutting off the path we came from.

"Lovely," Hook mutters, drawing his dagger, his voice low and edged with something dark as he glances my way. "Looks like we're here for dinner, Princess."

Chapter Forty

HOOK

SPIDERS. Of course it's fucking spiders. Because what else would this bloody place throw at us?

They're the size of dogs, their legs clicking against the webs they weave so easily, spinning some deadly prison around us. One of their bulbous heads gets too close, and I swat it away with a curse. "Perfect. Just bloody perfect."

I've got my dagger, but it feels about as useful as a toothpick right now. I step back, pulling Alice with me. She flinches at the touch but doesn't say anything—too busy staring at the eight-legged nightmares closing in.

"We need to go," she whispers, her voice trembling.

"You don't say?" I glance down at her, catching her eye.

Her glare is sharp, and I half expect her to snap at me, but the skittering legs of the spiders cut the moment short. Their clicking fills the silence, setting my teeth on edge as I edge us sideways. Maybe, just maybe, we can slip past one of the smaller ones without drawing too much attention.

Alice, naturally, missteps. She backs straight into a sticky web stretched between two trees. She gasps, tugging at the strands as they tangle around her arms and shoulders. The more she struggles, the worse it gets.

“Bloody brilliant,” I growl, stepping forward. My dagger slices through the web, freeing her, but the force sends her straight into me. I catch her instinctively, her body pressed against mine for a fraction too long. Her wide eyes meet mine, her breath coming fast.

“Not exactly the time or place,” I murmur, raising an eyebrow.

She pulls back sharply, yanking herself free. “Don’t flatter yourself,” she snaps, straightening her dress and gesturing to the right. “This way.”

I’m about to argue when a low, grating hiss behind us cuts through the air. I turn, and there it is—the biggest spider yet. Its fangs glisten with venom, its multiple eyes fixed on us with unnerving focus.

Alice inhales sharply, her hand gripping my sleeve.

The thing moves toward us, its legs arching and twitching like it’s savouring the moment.

“Oh, so now you’re leading?” I throw Alice a dry glance.

“Yes, now,” she says, her voice firm in a way that almost surprises me. She takes off running, and there’s no time to argue. I follow, our boots pounding over the soft moss and twisted roots.

We dodge through the trees, their branches clawing at us as the monstrous spider barrels after us. Smaller ones scuttle alongside her, their clicking legs echoing in the shadows.

I glance back. The queen spider—because of course there’s a fucking queen—is relentless, her massive legs crushing everything in her path. Bones litter the ground, some half-hidden in webs, swinging like grotesque ornaments.

Biting back a curse, I pick up my pace, nearly shoving Alice ahead of me.

“Alice, watch out,” I shout as she stumbles over a root. She catches herself and keeps running, but I shove her sideways anyway, just as a smaller spider lunges for her.

“What the hell, Hook?” she yells, scrambling back to her feet.

“No time for apologies. Get up and run.” I grab her hand and pull her with me.

The queen spider screeches, the sound rattling through the forest. Her pace quickens, her minions clicking and chittering in a frenzy.

Something changes. A faint light flickers from Alice’s hand, warm and strange. It’s so faint I almost miss it, but the queen doesn’t.

She recoils with another ear-piercing screech, her many eyes narrowing.

And then she speaks.

“Alice.”

The way she drags out the name, lisping and rasping, makes my skin crawl.

“You do not belong here,” the queen hisses, her voice like nails scraping glass.

Alice freezes, pale as a ghost, staring at the spider. Her hand still glows faintly, like it’s got a mind of its own.

“Run,” I shout, snapping her out of whatever trance she’s in. I grab her arm, and we bolt, her hand still warm in mine as we race ahead.

The forest is a blur, the mist curling around us, and I almost think we’ve made it—

Until a spider drops down in front of us.

We skid to a stop. Alice lurches forward, but I catch her again, pulling her back before she smacks into the grotesque thing.

“Great plan,” she mutters, her voice shaking.

“Not now, princess,” I snap, my dagger ready, though it feels more useless than ever.

The spider queen looms behind us, her hiss cutting through the dark.

Not just one spider, either. Three. No, four. Five. Bloody hell, there’s a whole damned army.

I raise my knife, the blade catching what little light there is. “Stay back, the lot of you,” I snarl. “Or I’ll run you all through.”

The spiders don’t move, their legs clicking in some sick rhythm as they circle us. The hissing starts low, rising to a grating whisper that chills my blood. “Alice...”

The sound is revolting, her name dragged out in a grotesque lisp. I glance at her. She’s still, her fingers twitching at her sides, but her face is pale as death.

“We’re going back,” I snap, dragging her by the arm as I look for a way out. But it’s hopeless. The webs stretch between the trees like bloody walls, sticky strands shimmering in the dim light.

“Stay back,” Alice says suddenly, her voice steadier than I expect. She steps forward, drawing their attention.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” one of the spiders hisses again, its cluster of eyes gleaming as it fixates on her.

Another joins in. “You don’t belong.”

I glance upward just in time to see another spider descending from the canopy. Its bloated body looms over us, venom dripping from its glistening fangs.

“Shit,” I curse, grabbing Alice’s arm. She looks up, her eyes going wide, but instead of panicking, she raises her hands toward the monstrous thing, like she’s daring it to come closer.

And then it happens.

Not light exactly, but the forest shifts. The air vibrates, the ground quivers, and a pressure builds around us, pushing outward. The descending spider is flung backward with a screech, its legs flailing as it crashes into the others.

The ones in front of us scatter like dead leaves, their grotesque bodies smacking into the trees. The forest falls still, an eerie hum lingering in the air.

“What the hell did you just do?” I demand, spinning to face her.

“Nothing,” she says, though her voice is unconvincing. Her hands tremble, and her eyes flick to the spiders still lurking in the shadows, their hiss quiet but venomous.

The glow fades, but their gazes remain fixed on her, filled with a mix of fear and hatred.

“Run,” Alice says, her voice firmer this time.

For once, I don’t argue. Grabbing her hand, I yank her forward, and we run.

Roots and moss threaten to trip us, branches clawing at our clothes as we barrel through the trees. The forest blurs around us, shadows shifting, the spiders’ hissing fading as we put distance between us.

We break into a clearing, the openness startling after the suffocating closeness of the woods. I slow, breathing hard, and glance over my shoulder.

“They’re gone,” I start to say, but before the words leave my mouth, Alice collides with me.

We hit the ground hard, her weight knocking the air from my lungs. For a moment, we’re tangled together, her breath warm against my neck, her hands pressing against my chest.

“If you wanted me flat on my back, love,” I say, my lips curling into a smirk, “all you had to do was ask.”

Her cheeks flush as she scrambles off me, muttering something I can’t make out.

She’s brushing herself off when her eyes land on the locket hanging from my neck. It must’ve slipped free in the fall.

“What’s that?” she asks, reaching out before I can tuck it back. Her fingers brush the tarnished silver, her expression softening. “Is that your son?”

The question hits harder than I expect, a dull ache stirring in my chest. “No,” I say shortly, my tone clipped.

She watches me, curiosity and something else—something too tender—lingering in her gaze.

“Come on,” I say. “Before the spiders change their minds.”

I get to my feet, brushing off the dirt, and start forward. But I don’t get far before my steps falter.

A towering wall of dark green hedges rises ahead of us, spiked and twisted, stretching high into the shadows.

Alice comes to a stop beside me, her breath catching as she takes it in.

I glare at the obstacle, my patience fraying. “A maze.”

Alice exhales sharply, muttering under her breath. “Of course it is.”

Chapter Forty-One

ALICE

THE MAZE SPRAWLS out before us, thorny hedges towering above, twisting in every direction, stretching into oblivion. It's dark and oppressive, like the place is holding its breath, just waiting for us to mess up.

"Of course, it's a maze," I mutter. Why would anything in Wonderland be straightforward? This place wasn't nearly as horrific when I was a kid.

I throw a look at Hook, who, as usual, looks infuriatingly unfazed. He just stands there, arms crossed, waiting, like this is all just a stroll through the park. Typical. "Well, go on, lead the way, Captain Marvellous," I say, gesturing ahead.

He arches a brow. "Captain Marvellous?" His lips curl into a slow grin. "You know, I rather like that."

"It wasn't meant as a compliment," I snap back, but he's clearly too entertained to care.

"Compliment or not, I'll take it." He tilts his head towards the maze entrance, thorny and narrow. "Aren't you leading this one? After all, you're the 'Wonderland expert.'"

I glance up at the towering walls, fingers brushing along the twisted branches. "This isn't the Wonderland I remember." Everything feels... wrong. The entrance pulses with a kind of life, the thorns seem sharper, more malicious. Something tells me once we step inside, it won't let us out so easily. But it's either face this or go back to the forest—and I'm not eager for a second round with those spiders.

I step forward, and Hook follows, close enough that his presence feels like a shadow over my shoulder. For once, he's silent. We twist and turn through the maze—left, right, left again. The air grows thick, heavy, the dark hedges closing in as though they're waiting to strike.

"So," I say, glancing back at him. Maybe we can actually have a conversation. I start with something of interest to him. "The Queen stole..."

"Neverland's amulet," he finishes, his voice taut.

"And that's what gives Neverland its magic? I thought the place just ran on pixie dust. At least, that's what the stories say."

His expression twists into something like a grimace. "It does. The amulet's filled with it."

I frown. "So... why not just make another one?"

He stops dead, looking at me as if I've grown another head. "Brilliant idea. I'll just pop back to Neverland, tell everyone all we need to do is whip up another one." He feigns turning back, a mocking expression plastered on his face.

I halt, hands on my hips, glaring right back. "You know, a simple 'it doesn't work that way' would've sufficed. Is sarcasm your default setting, or are you always this... cranky?"

"Cranky?" His brows shoot up. "I'm not cranky."

"Really?"

"Really."

We move on, taking another left, then another. I stop in my tracks, groaning as the path cuts off. "Dead end." Frustrated, I back up, colliding squarely with Hook. His arms instinctively come around me to keep us both steady, and for a moment, we're too close—close enough that I can feel his breath on my cheek, the roughness of his grip as he holds me.

"Do try watching where you're going, love," he murmurs, voice low and too damn smug.

"Then stop hovering," I bite out, pushing myself out of his hold, feeling my cheeks heat. But his smirk says it all. He's enjoying every second of this. If there's one thing Hook knows how to do well, it's get under my skin.

Hook smirks, unbothered as always, his eyes full of that irritating confidence that's practically taunting me at this point.

"Princess, I—"

Without thinking, I slap my hand over his mouth. “Don’t even say it.” His mouth is warm and firm under my palm, and there’s something about the feel of his skin against mine that sends a strange shiver through me. I pull my hand back, and it takes everything I’ve got to ignore the way my heart’s doing a ridiculous tap dance in my chest. I take a breath to steady myself.

“Alice,” I say, firmly. “Just call me Alice.”

For a split second, his gaze holds mine, piercing, as if he’s looking right into me, past every wall I’ve ever put up. It’s unnerving, and not helping my racing pulse one bit. His lips twitch slightly, and I can see he’s about to ruin the moment.

“Alice,” he repeats, then adds with that infuriating smirk, “Princess Alice.”

I groan in annoyance. “Why are you like this?” I shake my head, moving away before he can come up with another witty retort.

We keep moving through the maze, turning and turning, only to hit dead end after dead end. Finally, he lets out an exaggerated sigh. “Would you like me to take over?”

I throw my arms out, gesturing to the endless maze around us. “Be my guest if you think you know the way,” I say.

He shoots me a self-assured grin and strides off with infuriating confidence, shrugging slightly as if this is all just some fun game. I follow, and for a while, it feels like we’re making progress as we take turn after turn down long, twisting paths. But instead of leading us anywhere useful, we end up right back in another dead end.

“Brilliant,” I mutter after what feels like an eternity. “Maybe you’ve got us even more lost?”

“Or maybe you got us so lost in the first place, and I’m the one trying to get us un-lost. Ever think of that?”

“No, because I’m not a condescending pig.”

“Oh, Princess,” he sighs, lifting his shoulders in a mock-pleased shrug. “So much affection today. Whatever did I do to deserve it?”

I bite my lip, refusing to give him the satisfaction of a reaction, but he just laughs, striding off ahead like he owns the place. We wander on, the maze stretching out endlessly, mocking us at every turn. It feels like hours, with every corner looking the same, the walls towering above and closing

in. It's exhausting, and I'm beginning to feel like this maze is laughing at us.

Finally, I stop, leaning against one of the thorny walls, my patience wearing dangerously thin. Out of sheer desperation, I glance down at my watch. The step counter reads over twenty thousand steps.

"Wow," I mutter to myself.

Hook smirks as he looks over my shoulder at the maze that has, by some magical trickery, wound us into circles for hours. He seems irritatingly amused by my frustration, like this is all some grand joke. I lift my wrist, staring at the watch face. "Twenty-two thousand, seventy-three steps," I mutter.

"What?" His eyes flicker with a trace of interest as he steps closer, gripping my wrist to pull the watch to where he can see it. "You Hollowlands actually count how many steps you take? Why? Is there a medal at the end of the day?"

I open my mouth to explain, but any answer I come up with will only feed his sarcasm. "It's just a thing."

"Oh, just a thing," he mocks, voice laced with patronising amusement. "How precious."

I snatch my arm back. "Shut up."

"Shut up," he repeats in a high-pitched, grating mimic of my voice.

"You're so childish."

"Oh, you're so childish," he mocks again, hands on his hips.

I stare him down, hands on my hips, as the urge to strangle him grows stronger. "Really? We're doing this?"

"Really, we're doing this?" He mimics again.

Letting out a deep, irritated sigh, I drop to the ground and lean back against the thorny hedge. "I need a rest," I say, my voice laced with exasperation. "I'm tired, I'm thirsty, and this is getting us nowhere, and you're driving me nuts." Why, of all the people I had to be stuck with, did I get you?

Hook sighs, then reaches into his jacket, producing a flask. He extends it towards me. "Here. Water."

I stare at it, wary.

"It's just water," he says with a dramatic eye roll, unscrewing the cap and taking a swig himself before handing it back to me. "Don't be stubborn."

“Me, stubborn?” I snatch the flask, shooting him a hard look. “Have you looked in a mirror lately?”

He places a hand under his chin, giving me an exaggerated, self-satisfied smile. “Every day, darling, and it’s a wonderful sight to behold.”

“Oh, for the love of God...” I mutter, bringing the flask to my nose to sniff it suspiciously before taking a sip. The water is shockingly cold, refreshing in a way that almost makes the headache from dealing with him ease for a moment.

But before I get more than two gulps, he yanks it back, raising an eyebrow at me. “No need to drink it all, Princess. I know you’re used to being pampered, but—”

“Will ... you ... stop ... calling ... me ‘Princess’?”

He smirks. “Whatever you say, Princess.”

I glare at him, my patience stretched thin. “You are, without a doubt, the most annoying person I have ever met in the entire history of my life.”

He bows, sweeping his hand out in a mock display. “Thank you, my lady.”

I’m going to kill him.

I sink back against the hedge, savouring the brief relief as the ache in my legs eases. Hook, meanwhile, can’t seem to sit still for even a second. He paces, restless, glancing down each twisting path as if the maze might somehow give up its secrets just because he’s in a hurry.

“Are you really going to just sit here?” he finally says, turning to me.

“I just need a break. Not everyone operates on full-throttle all the time. What’s your problem with sitting still?”

He lets out an exaggerated huff and starts fidgeting, brushing at his coat, tugging at his sleeves. “I just want to get the amulet and leave. Get back to Neverland and save the world.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Save yourself, you mean.” His expression hardens. I gesture for him to sit. “We can rest a bit; the maze isn’t going anywhere.”

“For how long?” he asks, already agitated.

I shrug. “I don’t know. You can go if you want. If you think you know the way out, then by all means—don’t let me stop you.”

For a moment, he hesitates, his hand flying to his hair, brushing it back in that way he does when something’s genuinely bothering him. It’s a tell, and for someone who wears his ego like armour, it’s surprisingly human.

But instead of answering, he just nods sharply, throws me one last look, and strides off, his boots crunching along the path.

I watch him disappear around a bend, swallowed up by the dark, twisting hedges. The silence that follows is almost suspiciously thick, as if the maze itself is waiting for something. But Wonderland isn't known for staying silent long; sooner or later, it'll make its next move. I close my eyes, listening, waiting.

Nothing. Not a single sound, not even the wind. Thirty minutes pass, and I glance at my watch, frowning. Surely, he wouldn't actually leave, would he? A twist of something uncomfortable wriggles in my stomach. Hook was irritating, rude, an absolute thorn in my side—but actually leaving? Really? I didn't think he would.

"Men," I mutter, hugging my knees. Chris used to play this game too—disappearing whenever I pointed out his nonsense, waiting for me to "calm down." It was infuriating. He'd always say he was leaving, but he never did. He'd storm out, let me stew in silence, then come back like nothing happened. But Hook...

"Fine," I say out loud, voice firm, though there's no one here to hear me. "Fine, fine, fine. I don't need him. I don't need anyone." I lean back, trying to ignore the strange hollow feeling his absence leaves behind. But I don't need him. I battled Wonderland last time without him. This time will be no different. Only...

I sit up, narrowing my eyes at a dark shape moving toward me in the distance, growing larger and more hurried by the second. "What in the heck is...?"

"Alice." Hook's voice cuts through the silence, loud, urgent. He's running, his eyes wild, hair slightly dishevelled, and it's enough to send a surge of unease straight through me.

"Alice, get up," he shouts, panic edging his voice. "Run, now."

I stumble to my feet, heart hammering as his urgency sinks in, but before I can ask what's coming, he grabs my hand, pulling me into a sprint as shadows twist and curl down the path, swallowing everything in their path.

"Keep moving," he says, his voice sharp, his grip firm as he pulls me along.

"What the hell is that?"

Chapter Forty-Two

HOOK

"WHAT THE HELL DID YOU DO?"

"I found the exit," I say. What I don't mention is that I didn't mean to push all those buttons, but they were there, and ignoring them isn't in my nature.

Oops.

We run, tearing through the maze, doubling back, and taking turns that make no sense. The exit isn't far—I know that much—but getting to it while this thing is chasing us? That's a different story.

The metal ball behind us grinds through the maze like the hedges are paper, the sound sharp and relentless. Its spinning blades chew up the greenery and fling splinters like shrapnel. I grab Alice's arm, yanking her forward before she can get herself killed.

"Let go of me," she snaps, trying to twist free.

"Not a chance," I bite back, pulling harder. She's fast, but not fast enough to outrun *that*.

The sound of ripping foliage grows louder, pressing in around us as we twist through another turn. Every corner looks the same. Every path leads nowhere. This is a mess—one of my making, of course. The damn thing is close enough now that I can feel the air shift behind us, and when we hit a long stretch, it's there, ready to grind us into pieces.

I stop dead. Alice slams into my back, stumbling.

"What the hell are you doing?" she yells, her voice sharp with panic.

“Saving your life,” I snap, grabbing her shoulders and spinning her toward a side path. But another machine rolls out of the shadows ahead of us—bigger, meaner. Two of them now.

“We’re trapped,” she says, breathless.

“Not yet.”

We bolt down the nearest opening, only to find it’s a dead end. Great. Perfect. The wall of tangled branches mocks us as we skid to a stop.

“What now?” she demands, panting.

The grinding of metal grows louder. I glance back—the thing’s almost here. Pressing her into the hedge, I hold my arm in front of her.

Her eyes dart to mine. “Hook...” There’s fear in her voice, but she keeps it together.

“Just stay behind me,” I say, even though we both know that won’t help much when those blades hit.

“Hook.” This time, there’s more urgency—and then she’s gone from under my arm.

I whip around. She’s on her knees, crawling through a hole in the hedge. “Come on,” she shouts, her voice tight with desperation.

I drop, glancing back at the spinning blades tearing through the path behind us. Bits of branches and debris spit out, hitting my back as I crawl after her. The space is tight, leaves and thorns snagging at my clothes. Alice pushes forward, shoving through the dense brush.

“Move faster,” she hisses, glancing back at me, her face too close.

“You try crawling with this much grace,” I growl, ducking lower to avoid a branch.

We burst through to the other side, and she’s on her feet first, already looking for the next escape.

“Hook...”

There’s something in the way she says my name—flat, almost resigned. I turn and see it. Another machine, bigger than the last, its blades turning in every direction.

“Oh, brilliant,” I mutter.

We run again.

“There,” she shouts, pointing to a door half-hidden in vines ahead of us.

We sprint toward it, the sound of the machine bearing down on us. Alice reaches the door first, grabbing the handle and twisting. Nothing.

"It's locked," she cries, slamming her shoulder into it.

"Step back," I bark, shoving past her.

She backs up, but her wide-eyed stare tells me she doesn't think I can do it. The air shifts again, and the machine's almost on top of us. I throw myself at the door, slamming my shoulder into the wood. Pain shoots down my arm, but the door doesn't budge.

"Try harder," she yells, panic creeping into her voice.

"Do you think I'm not?" I snap, throwing my weight into it again. The wood cracks but doesn't give.

I glance back. The machine's close enough now that I can see the individual blades spinning. No time. I step back, brace myself, and kick the door with everything I've got. It bursts open, swinging wide.

Grabbing Alice's arm, I shove her through the opening before following and slamming the door shut behind us. The crunch of metal colliding with wood echoes on the other side, then nothing.

It's pitch black.

Alice's breathing is ragged beside me, and I can feel her tense, ready to keep running.

"Where... where are we?" she asks, her voice tight and breathless.

"Safe," I say, though it feels more like a guess.

She steps back, staring at me. Her hair's a mess, her face streaked with dirt, but there's a defiance in her expression, even now. "If this is your version of safe, remind me to never follow you anywhere again."

I huff out a laugh, leaning against the wall. "You're welcome."

She glares at me, but there's no real heat in it. "You're impossible."

"And yet, here we are," I say, pushing off the wall and brushing past her. The floor shifts beneath us suddenly, and I grab for something to steady myself.

"Hook," she shouts, stumbling into me.

The ground gives way, and we drop. The fall isn't long, but the landing hits hard, the impact jarring my spine. Alice groans beside me, rolling onto her side.

I sit up, reaching out instinctively to steady her, but she pulls away, her breathing still uneven.

"Where the hell are we now?" she mutters, sitting up and glaring at the darkness. "I can't see a damn thing."

It's so dark I can't bloody see. I walk forward cautiously, hands stretched out like a zombie, trying to feel my way through. My fingertips brush against something soft—but firm—and instinctively, my hand closes around it.

"Hook," Alice yells, slapping my hand away.

The realisation hits fast. I let out a low laugh, unapologetic. "Nice pair."

"You're such an arsehole."

"Oh, there's that affection again. I do love it when you talk dirty to me." I can almost feel the glare she's probably giving me through the dark. She shifts beside me, her breath coming quick. It's either frustration, or she's considering hitting me. Probably both.

"Just... keep your hands to yourself," she huffs.

"No promises."

I step away, groping blindly through the blackness, my hand landing on something solid this time. Cold metal. Bars. I grip them tightly, running my hand along to find an opening. "I think there's a gate here," I say, squinting uselessly into the dark.

"Congratulations," Alice mutters. "We'll put that on your tombstone: '*Captain Hook: Found the Gate.*'"

I ignore her, gripping the bars harder. "Alice," I call out when she doesn't follow up with more of her usual sarcasm. She's nearby—I can hear her breathing and the faint rustle of her clothes.

"It's just a wall this side," she says, distracted. "I think—"

She cuts off with a yelp, and my heart jumps to my throat. I'm moving towards her before she even speaks again.

"What happened?"

"Something moved under my hand!" she hisses.

There's a faint sound—like a low hiss and a slithering. It prickles at the back of my neck. I have no intention of finding out what it is.

"Brilliant," I mutter, forcing the word through gritted teeth.

"What?"

"Just fantastic," I say dryly, moving back to where I'd found the bars earlier. My hands skim over the cold metal, but nothing feels right. The bloody thing seems to have moved. "I *know* it's here," I say. "I can't find the damn thing now."

"We need light or something," Alice says.

“Can’t you use your magic?”

“I don’t have magic,” she says. “I’m not from here, remember?”

“That doesn’t mean you don’t have any.” I grip hold of the bars, rattling them, seeing if I can pull them open. From what I can feel, there is no catch or handle. The gate isn’t actually a gate, but rather just a section of bars. For what? It’s not to see through; it isn’t a window, because we can’t see fuck all down here.

“What if we try climbing back up?” she asks.

I glance upwards at the pitch-black void we fell from. “Sure, if you can actually see where we’re going. Want me to hoist you up there?”

There’s a pause. “You’re insufferable, you know that?”

“So you keep telling me.” I grip the bars harder, testing them again for any weakness. Nothing. My breath hisses out in frustration.

Alice steps closer, and I can feel her moving just behind me. Her arm brushes mine, and I can’t tell if it’s deliberate or not, but the contact sends a jolt through me. She shifts past me, her shoulder knocking into mine.

“Move over,” she mutters, running her hands over the bars. “You’re not the only one with hands.”

“I noticed.”

“Shut up.” She tugs the metal, but it doesn’t give. Her breathing quickens. “It’s no use,” she says, letting go and stepping back into me. Her foot hits mine, and she stumbles, bumping into my chest.

I steady her automatically, hands on her arms. “Careful, sunshine.”

She glares up at me—or at least, I think she does. The dark is so thick I can’t even see her face, but I can *feel* the anger radiating off her.

“This is pointless.”

“Not quite.” I keep my hands on her shoulders for a beat longer than necessary, grounding her—or maybe grounding myself. Then I step back.

“Use your magic.”

“I told you,” she bites out. “I don’t *have* any. I’m not like you.”

“Have you even tried?”

“No, but I—”

“Then how do you know?” I press, leaning closer, my voice dropping. “Hmm?”

She doesn’t answer, not right away, and I hear the hitch in her breath. Then she counters, “What about *you*? You’re supposed to have magic, right? You’re meant to be this great, powerful pirate. So, use *your* magic.

Turn on the lights, open the locks—solve this, since you’re so sure of yourself.”

“I *am* a great, powerful pirate,” I growl.

“Then prove it.”

I scoff, snapping my fingers in the air. “Drained,” I say. “Remember the whole reason I’m here?”

As if to prove my point, the snap produces a brief flash of light. It’s barely there—just long enough to illuminate the space around us—and my stomach plummets when I see it.

Stone walls curve around us in a perfect circle, narrowing to the top where we fell. The floor is damp and uneven, the air thick with moisture and decay. No windows, no doors, no obvious way out.

“We’re in an oubliette,” I say, the words flat, almost hollow.

“An oubliette?” she echoes, her tone sharp with confusion. “What the hell is that?”

“A place to throw people when you want to forget about them,” I say, my voice tightening as I force the memories back. “They used them in castles and manors—old places. Toss someone down here, usually under the kitchen, so they can hear all the chatter and smell the food while they rot away. No one checks. No one remembers. They just... starve to death.”

“Perfect,” she says eventually, her voice quieter now. “Just bloody perfect.”

“Yep,” I say, though my throat feels tight. “My uncle threw me in one once. Somewhere like this.”

I think her head snaps up. I hear the sudden movement of clothes. “But you clearly got out. How?”

I pause, not actually sure what to say because I shouldn’t have told her.

When I don’t answer, she says, “I’m only asking because it might prove useful right now.”

I swallow past the constriction in my throat. “I didn’t.”

Chapter Forty-Three

ALICE

THERE'S pain in his voice. I don't miss it. The way he says it—it's not the words themselves, but the drop in his tone. The quiet dread lacing them. For a man who rarely stops smirking or pushing every bloody button I have, it feels wrong. Too raw. Too real.

I want to ask him about it, but the silence between us makes my throat tighten. He doesn't want to talk, and maybe, I'm not sure I want to hear whatever answer he'd give me.

Instead, I push the words down, burying them under the knot in my chest. I force sharpness into my voice, even though I don't feel it. "So... magic," I say. "You're convinced I have it."

"You do," he replies, calm and certain, like it's obvious.

"How would I use it, then? If you're so sure I've got some, how does it work?"

I can feel him staring at me. I can't see him—it's too dark for that—but his gaze is heavy, like it's pinning me in place.

"You believe in yourself," he says simply.

I snort. "I have to *believe* I have it? This is like some Santa Claus nonsense. You know, the movies where Santa starts fading because no one believes in Christmas anymore? It's all so... cliché."

"You think it's cliché because it's right."

I let my arms fall to my sides, my lips twisting into a scowl. Not that he can see it. "Come on, Hook."

“Try it. Believe you have it. See what happens. Conjure us a ball of light from your hands.”

“I can’t,” I say. “And it’s not about not believing in myself. Magic doesn’t exist where I come from.”

“It does,” he says, his voice calm but firm. “If you feel for it.”

I glare in his direction, frustration curling hot in my chest. “Feel what, exactly? Fear? Desperation? Because I’m already drowning in both, and I don’t see anything magical happening.”

“If those work, use them.”

I want to argue, to throw some biting remark back at him, but instead, I let out a sharp breath. Maybe if I try—just to shut him up—I can prove him wrong. Prove that magic doesn’t exist. Prove that I’m not some chosen whatever.

“Fine,” I say.

Slowly, I lift my hands in front of me, palms cupped like I’m catching water.

Then I feel him move.

He steps closer, and his presence presses into the space around me. His hands slide under mine, rough and warm, cradling them. My breath catches. He’s right in front of me now, his body so close I can feel the heat of him, the steady rhythm of his breathing.

“How do *you* use your magic?” I ask, my voice quieter than I mean it to be.

“Close your eyes,” he says to me.

I do. It feels ridiculous because it’s already pitch-black, but somehow, it makes sense.

“Go into yourself,” Hook says, his voice low but steady, wrapping around me like a lifeline in the suffocating dark. “Think. Feel the magic there. Feel it in your blood.”

His words are quiet but sure, each one grounding me. I close my eyes—not that it makes much difference here—and focus on his voice, letting it pull me away from my panic.

“Feel your blood flowing through your veins,” he continues, and his tone softens, turning almost coaxing. “Every cell, every fibre of you—it has light. It has power. Pull on it. Imagine it.”

I swallow hard, trying to do what he says. My breathing slows, and I picture the flow of my blood, the rhythm of my pulse, the warmth deep

inside me that feels distant but real.

“Don’t overthink it,” he murmurs, his voice closer now, like he’s moved towards me without a sound. “You’ve spent too long doubting yourself. Stop. Just feel.”

His words make something in my chest tighten. I can’t tell if it’s frustration or something softer, something I’m not ready to name.

“It’s not that simple,” I whisper, my voice shaky.

“Yes, it is,” he says, firm but not unkind. “You’re just scared to trust it. Scared to trust yourself.”

His voice is so close now that I can feel the faint warmth of his breath against my cheek. The dark amplifies everything—the sound of his words, the space between us, or maybe the lack of it.

I swallow hard, my pulse quickening. “You’re awfully sure of yourself,” I manage, my voice barely above a whisper.

“I am,” he replies, and there’s a hint of a smile in his tone. “Because I can see it in you. Even if you can’t yet.”

The words linger between us, heavy and intimate. I can feel his presence like a solid thing, his closeness wrapping around me like a second skin. My breathing hitches, and I’m painfully aware of how near he is, the dark hiding the expression I don’t want him to see—the confusion, the vulnerability, the flicker of something I can’t name.

“Keep going,” he says softly, his voice dropping lower. I can almost feel his lips brush the shell of my ear, the intimacy of it sending a shiver down my spine. “Feel it. Let it grow.”

I draw in a shaky breath, closing my eyes tighter, and focus. The warmth inside me pulses faintly, responding to his words. It’s like he’s tethering me to something solid in the suffocating dark.

“Good,” he murmurs, the word so quiet it feels like it’s meant just for me.

The warmth builds, spreading through my chest, down my arms, to the tips of my fingers. It’s still faint, fragile, but it’s there.

“Do you feel it?” he asks, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Yes,” I breathe.

“Then trust it,” he says. His hands pull away from mine, and for a second, I whimper at the absence, but the heat from his hands still mingles with the pulse in my palms. “It’s yours, Alice. Let it be yours.”

His words dig under my skin, into the part of me I've tried to ignore for so long—the part my grandmother wanted to keep alive. And I think, when she got sick, I let it go. I let it get crowded out by all the other shit in my life. It's the part of me that fights against everything and everyone—including myself.

"Open your eyes, Alice," Hook whispers, and his voice is impossibly close now.

I do, and he's looking at me.

"Oh my god," I whisper, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

I can see him. The faint, golden glow from the ball of light in my hands illuminates his face, casting shadows along the hard lines of his jaw and the intensity in his eyes. My breath catches as I glance down at my hands, trembling slightly, holding something I never thought possible.

"I'm doing it," I say, my voice shaking with disbelief. "Oh my god, I have magic."

The light flickers, as fragile as my focus. My chest tightens, panic surging as it begins to dim. "No, no, no," I whisper, tightening my grip on the glow as if that will somehow keep it alive. The warmth slips through my fingers, and the darkness creeps back in.

Before I can spiral, Hook's hands find mine again—steady, grounding. "Focus, Alice," he says, his voice low and firm, cutting through my panic. "It's yours. You're in control. You tell it what to do."

His touch steadies me, the heat of his hands pulling me back from the edge, anchoring the spark that feels like it's slipping away. I focus, my gaze locking on his, drawn into the way he's looking at me. My heart beats so strongly, I'm sure he can hear it.

"You're doing fine," he says softly. "Let it come back to you."

I nod, swallowing hard, and concentrate on the warmth in my chest, pulling it back down into my palms. The light flickers faintly. It's weak, but it's there, responding to me.

"There you go," he murmurs, his voice tinged with quiet pride. "You've got it."

The light steadies, glowing brighter.

"It's real," I whisper, staring at the ball of light resting in my hands. "I can't believe it's real."

"It's been real all along, Alice." His eyes meet mine. "You just stopped believing in yourself."

It isn't what he says that undoes me, but the weight of the words, the meaning behind them. My chest tightens, my breath catching. The light between my hands trembles slightly, but I hold it steady, meeting his gaze.

And damn it, freaking Alice—my eyes well up. Tears brim.

Slowly, Hook reaches out, his fingers brushing against my cheek. The calloused pad of his thumb catches a tear as it escapes, and he wipes it away so gently it nearly breaks me. "You're stronger than you think," he murmurs, his voice barely above a whisper. "More than you realise."

Chapter Forty-Four

HOOK

THE TEARS in her eyes catch the faint glow of the light she's holding, glinting like tiny stars. One escapes, tracing down her cheek, and I wipe it away before I can think better of it. She doesn't pull back, and for a moment, everything narrows to just us—her warmth, her light, her Alice.

I've seen people wield power before, raw and untamed, like they want to burn the world down just to prove they can. But this? This is something else. It's alive, steady, almost gentle. Watching her feel it for the first time is enough to make me forget we're stuck in this godforsaken oubliette with no way out.

"Better now?" I ask.

She nods, her breath trembles as she exhales. The ball of light between her hands steadies again, glowing warm and bright.

"Good." I step back—not too far, though. Just enough to let her hold the light on her own and really know this is all on her. "You did that, princess. All of it. No one else."

Her gaze flicks to mine. For a second, I think she's about to tell me off again, but instead, her mouth quirks into a smile. "Stop calling me princess," she says, but there's none of her usual irritation in her tone, none of that, I'm ready to kill you edge. "I did do it."

The light in her hands grows stronger, chasing away more of the shadows. It gives me a proper look at where we are—stone, damp, cold.

No hidden doors, no trapdoors, no escape. Just us in the dark. Yet somehow, with her here, it doesn't feel as suffocating as it should.

It doesn't feel like the last time.

I drag a hand over the back of my neck, pushing away the memories clawing at the edges of my mind. I don't need to see those. I don't need to remember how similar this place is to where I was thrown when I was eleven and alone.

It's the same, but it's different.

"Hook?"

Her voice pulls me back. I meet her eyes, and the concern there sends a pang through me.

"Yeah?"

"What do we do now?" she asks. There's something in her voice—vulnerability, hesitation—that hits harder than it should.

I force a small smile, even though I don't feel it. "Well, first, we don't panic."

She raises a brow. "And second?"

I glance around at the unrelenting walls. "I don't have a fucking clue."

The walls are packed with mud—the dense, stubborn kind that sticks to your nails if you press too hard, but no amount of clawing will get us anywhere. It's like clay, solid and unyielding. I dig a finger into the cold surface, testing it, but it's pointless. We'd need years to claw our way out of here, and that's if we didn't die first.

"Well, we're not digging our way out," I say, pulling my hand back. "We'd be dead long before we hit the surface, fingers stripped to the bone like everything else this place devours."

Alice steps closer, bringing her light with her. She cradles it in both hands, the faint golden glow casting soft shadows on her face.

"You can make that hover, you know," I tell her, glancing at the light. "You don't have to hold it."

She raises a brow. "How do I do that?"

"You tell it," I say, shrugging like it's the simplest thing in the world.

Her lips purse, sceptical, but the light flickers slightly, like it's listening. And damn if I'm not curious to see what she'll do next. She focuses on the light. Her brows knit together, and I can see the gears turning in that infuriating, brilliant head of hers. "Okay," she mutters, her

voice low, almost like she's talking to herself. "Hover. Float. Do... whatever magic lights are supposed to do."

For a moment, nothing happens and even I hold my breath. Then, slowly, the light lifts from her palms, hovering in the space between us. It wavers slightly, like it's testing its own boundaries, before steadying. The glow softens, warm and steady, and I can't help the smirk tugging at the corner of my mouth.

"See? Not so hard." I go to the break in the wall where the bars are we'd found. It's not a gate. It's nothing more than bars wedged into the earth. I run my hands over the metal again, feeling it, trying to peer beyond into the dark. It's just more shadows, stretching endlessly.

Alice steps up beside me. "What is the point of this?"

"These places are all about torture," I say. "Not physical—mental. That's what this is. Alone in the dark, feeling around, making you think you've found a gate, a way out." I shake my head, jaw tight. The things in my memory want to claw their way to the surface, to remind me. But I'm not that kid anymore. I'm not there, at my uncle's mercy. There's no one to hit me, no one to blame me.

My grip tightens around one of the bars, knuckles white. I don't even notice until I feel the cold of the metal biting into my palm.

"Why would someone do that?" Alice asks, her voice low.

I don't look at her when I answer. "Because people are cruel."

Her light flickers, casting jagged shadows on the bars so we can see them properly now—no lock, no handle. Nothing to suggest they should ever open.

I pull out my knife and work at the base where the bars dig into the earth. The mud crumbles easily, flaking away in thick clumps.

She crouches beside me, the light in her hands flickering as she steadies it. "Do you really think we'll find anything?"

"No," I admit, not pausing. "But it's better than doing nothing."

Alice leans in closer, her light casting faint shadows over the exposed metal. "Do you think it goes the whole way around?"

"You mean, do I think we're inside a barred, buried ball?" I glance at her, my voice flat. "Yes."

I shift a few feet along the wall, testing another section. My blade slips easily into the packed earth, the mud giving way just as quickly as before. But it's the same—more bars beneath, unbroken and endless. I trace the

metal with my fingers, pick at different parts of the wall, but it's futile. I'm not even hoping anymore. I'm just proving to myself that it's exactly what I think it is: a perfect cage, designed to crush any spark of hope.

"Whoever built this wasn't planning on giving anyone a way out," I say, my voice low, almost bitter. I tap the blade against the bars, the metallic clang echoing faintly in the cramped space. "This isn't just a prison—it's a grave."

Alice's light flares brighter at my words, catching the hard set of her jaw as she stares at the exposed metal. She doesn't say anything, but her silence is louder than any reply.

After several more fruitless attempts to pry something—anything—useful from the bars, I slump back against the wall, letting out a breath. My knife spins absently between my fingers. Alice follows my lead, lowering herself to the ground beside me. She sits cross-legged, her light flickering faintly, dimming for a moment before steadying itself again.

She holds her hand out in front of her, studying the glow with a faint furrow in her brow.

"You're getting better at that," I say, nodding toward the light.

She glances at me, then back at the ball of light. "It feels... weird. Like it's alive. But not. Like it's part of me, but also separate."

I nod, resting the knife on my thigh. "Magic feels that way. Like a wild animal, waiting for you to decide whether to tame it or let it loose."

Her shoulders slump slightly, and she pulls her knees up, resting her chin on them. She lowers her hand, placing the glowing ball gently on the ground in front of us. Its soft glow bathes her face in light, making the tightness in her expression more obvious.

Her shoulders slump slightly, and she pulls her knees up, resting her chin on them. She lowers her hand, placing the glowing ball gently on the ground in front of us. Its soft glow bathes her face in light, making the tightness in her expression more obvious.

"What did you mean before," she asks quietly, not looking at me, "when you said you were in one of these before, but didn't get out? You must have. Or you wouldn't be here."

I tighten my grip on the knife, spinning it absently between my fingers. Her question lingers, sharp and direct, and I'm not sure how to answer. The bars glint faintly in her light, taunting me with their permanence.

In the end, I shrug, forcing a smirk onto my face. “Yeah, well, I’m full of surprises.” I tilt my head, trying to shift the focus off me. “Look at you, for example. Little Miss ‘Magic Doesn’t Exist,’ holding a glowing ball of light like it’s nothing. If I told the Alice I met yesterday this would happen, she’d have laughed in my face.”

She narrows her eyes, clearly not buying my deflection, but thankfully, she doesn’t push.

After a beat, I reach into my jacket and pull out a folded bundle of cloth. Without a word, I offer it to Alice.

She hesitates before taking it, her fingers brushing mine as she does. Slowly, she peels back the first layer of cloth and frowns. “You took food from the inn? When did you get this?”

I pull another bundle from my pocket, unwrapping a chunk of bread for myself. “A pirate never reveals his secrets,” I say, biting into the bread.

We sit in comfortable silence, the light glowing between us, the faint sound of our chewing the only thing filling the air. But it doesn’t last long. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Alice’s gaze flick to my shoulder.

“You’re favouring your left side,” she says, her tone matter-of-fact, though her expression tells a different story.

“It’s nothing,” I say, dismissing her with a wave of my hand. “I’ve had worse.”

Her brows draw together, but she doesn’t say anything yet.

“I’m used to aches and pains. It’s all part of what I do. Sailing my ship, being at sea—pain and injury come with it.”

“Take off your jacket,” she says, her voice firm, like she’s already decided this is happening.

I narrow my eyes at her. “A little bossy, aren’t you, princess?”

“Hook.” Her tone softens slightly, but there’s no room for argument. “Let me look.”

With a reluctant sigh, I shrug out of the jacket, wincing as the movement pulls at my shoulder. The dim light catches the torn fabric of my shirt, and her sharp intake of breath tells me what I already know—it looks bad.

“Bloody hell,” she mutters, leaning closer. “You didn’t think to mention your injury from had come open?”

Her hand hovers over the wound, and I can see the flicker of hesitation in her eyes before she tears off a piece of the cloth bundle I gave her.

“Hold still,” she says.

“It’s been bleeding,” I reply as she dabs at the wound. I hiss through my teeth as the pressure stings, but I don’t move. She works quietly, her touch gentle, and the light of her magic casts a soft glow over her face.

“It’s red,” she says after a moment, her voice quieter now. “It’s starting to look infected.”

I glance at her, and for a moment, there’s something in her expression—guilt, maybe, or worry.

“It’ll be fine,” I say, trying to brush it off. “Takes more than an arrow in the shoulder to put me down.”

“Your idea of fine is clearly skewed.” She pauses, her gaze shifting from the wound to her hands.

“What?” I ask, watching the way her lips press together like she’s working something out.

“Can... can magic fix this?” she asks hesitantly, glancing up at me.

“Magic can do a lot of things, love.”

“I barely know how to hold a light. How am I supposed to heal someone?”

“The same way you made the light, love. You let it in. You stop doubting yourself long enough to believe it can actually work.”

She stares at me, her hands trembling slightly as she looks back at the wound. “And if this doesn’t work?” she whispers.

“Then I’ll still be here, just as charming as ever,” I say with a grin, though the edge of pain in my voice betrays me.

Her lips twitch again, but this time there’s no humour in it. She lifts her hands over my shoulder, and the warmth of her fingers radiates through me. I can feel the sharp focus in her movements, the way she’s holding her breath as if afraid to break the moment.

“Alright,” she murmurs. “Let’s see if this works.”

Chapter Forty-Five

ALICE

I SHIFT CLOSER TO HOOK, the light casting soft shadows over his shoulder. I can't believe he didn't say anything. I know it's only been a day, but hell, this wound is red and swollen, and it has to be sore as hell.

"How is this not having you in agony?" I lean in closer, the light between my hands flickering, hesitant and fragile, but it's there. It feels warm, alive, and entirely unfamiliar as it hovers just above Hook's shoulder.

I focus on it, willing it to grow, to reach out and do whatever I've convinced myself is impossible. Because how can this be real?

Even the light on the ground, the one I somehow summoned earlier, just sits there, steady and unchanging. I feel it the same way I feel any other part of me—it hasn't gone out. But I still don't understand how it works.

I sigh and nod to myself. I'm really doing this. Really going to try to heal someone with my hands.

"You're doubting yourself again," Hook says, his voice cutting through my thoughts.

I bite my bottom lip and glance at him. "I was just thinking my family back home would have me locked up for this. For even trying it."

I can almost see Chris's face in my mind—his disbelief, his utter refusal to believe in anything beyond what he can see and touch. He

doesn't believe in anything. Not the universe, not God, not mediums, none of it. And here I am, trying to do this.

Hook doesn't say anything, just watches me with that steady, unflinching gaze.

"Alright," I whisper, my voice trembling as I steady my hands.

It doesn't take me long this time and the second ball of light hovers just above my palm, stronger than before. It pulses with a faint energy, alive in a way that feels almost like breathing. It's surreal, like I've really lost the plot, but I don't stop.

I tilt my hand, letting the edge of the light touch his unbroken skin. Then I tip my hand further, imagining the light rolling off my palm and into his wound. I close my eyes and force the image into my mind, willing it to happen.

The light shifts, spilling gently over the torn edges, and I close my hand over it.

"I don't know if it's doing anything. I..."

But Hook's eyes are closed, his breathing uneven. There's a bead of sweat at the edge of his hairline.

"I'm hurting you," I say, starting to pull my hand back.

His hand comes up, firm and steady, pressing mine back down against the jagged edges of his wound. "Keep going."

"I don't know if I can. I'm not sure—"

"Yes, you can," he says, his tone sharp but steady. "You're doing it. Don't stop."

I close my eyes again, shutting out the doubt clawing at my chest. Instead, I focus on the warmth in my hands, on the steady thrum of magic that feels like it's always been there, just waiting for me to notice.

It feels... comforting. Real. Tangible. Like the feeling you get at Christmas, or when you're warm and cosy and exactly where you need to be. It feels like that, not just in my hands but in my chest, spreading outward.

Hook lets out a soft sound, one that sends a strange, unexpected jolt through me. When I finally pull my hand back from his shoulder, he doesn't stop me this time.

"I didn't heal it," I say quietly, staring at the wound.

The redness is almost completely gone. The wound still gapes slightly, the edges rough and uneven, but it's no longer angry or swollen.

“I—” My voice catches, and I take a shaky breath. “I think that’s the best I can do.”

Hook twists slightly, trying to peer over his shoulder. Of course, he can’t see it. He flexes his arm experimentally, wincing a little but nodding.

“You did good, love,” he says, his voice softer now. “Better than good.”

“I didn’t heal it, though.”

“No, but it’s enough.” He meets my eyes, his expression softer than I’ve ever seen it. “You saved me a lot of pain.”

The sincerity in his voice steals my breath for a moment, but I shake it off, sitting back on my heels. The light dims as I let it go, retreating back into wherever it came from. Hook pulls his shirt into place and shrugs his jacket back on, but he’s not wincing now. Maybe it was enough.

“What now?” I ask, brushing invisible dirt off my hands. They tingle faintly, the sensation just under the skin.

He glances around us, his gaze searching the space as if answers might be waiting in the shadows. But there’s nothing here. Just the bars where we dug out a little, the muddled walls, and the hole we fell through.

It’s not too high, but high enough we can’t reach it—not even if I were to stand on his shoulders.

“I don’t know. No one even knows where we are,” he mutters, more to himself than to me.

We sit quietly for a while, the silence heavy but not uncomfortable. Finally, I find myself breaking it, my curiosity too much to keep in. “Why did your uncle put you in a place like this?”

His jaw clenches, the muscle there twitching. For a moment, I think he’s going to brush me off again with some smart remark, but instead, he exhales slowly, dragging a hand over his face. “My uncle,” he says, his tone flat, matter-of-fact. “He wanted all the inheritance and not the child who came with it.”

My stomach twists—not just at the words but at the way he says them, like he’s long since given up feeling anything about it. I almost apologise for asking, but what else do we do down here? “You have no parents?” I ask quietly.

He leans back against the wall, his knees up slightly, his legs parted. His arms rest across his knees, hands hanging loosely in the space between. He looks so calm, but the tension in his shoulders says otherwise. “I didn’t know my father. My mother never told me who he was, and

really, I didn't push. I was never at that age where it mattered." He takes a breath and glances at me, and for the first time, the cocky, annoying bastard I've come to know slips away.

It's a mask, I realise, and beneath it is something raw. In those bright blue eyes, set in that frustratingly perfect face, is pain—and something else.

"My mother died when I was nine," he says, his voice quieter now, the words slipping out like he's trying not to give them any power.

I shift slightly, the light from my earlier magic casting faint, flickering shadows across his face. "I'm sorry," I say softly.

His lips twist, and he shrugs. "It happened. It's done. No point dwelling on the things we can't change."

Before I can respond, he's back on his feet, his knife in hand and his back to me. He crouches near the bars, pulling at the dirt as if answers might be buried there.

I don't like the silence that falls between us. I didn't mean to pry into his life, not when it's clear whatever I unearthed is still raw.

"My grandmother died last week," I say, the words tumbling out to fill the quiet. "She was like a mother to me. She—"

He pauses, tossing a glance over his shoulder. "Your parents died, too?"

"No." I shake my head quickly. "No. Mine are both alive. Divorced now, but alive. I'm sure my mother wishes my father were dead sometimes." I let out a humourless laugh. "Probably wishes I were dead too."

"I doubt that," he says, his voice softer than I expect.

I scoff, hugging my knees to my chest. "My mother and I don't get along. I don't think we ever have." I press my hands into my lap, sitting cross-legged. The folds of my dress bunch around me, giving me a strange sense of comfort. It's not cold here—far from it—but somehow, it feels right to be tucked into myself.

"It was worse after I came here the last time," I admit. "I think... I think that's when it really changed. The shift."

Hook doesn't say anything, but I can feel his attention on me, the weight of it. It's strange—his silence isn't like the heavy, oppressive quiet of this place. It feels like... space. Room to speak.

“When I was a kid,” I begin again, “small, I used to read all the time. I liked the ones with pictures in. My sister read ‘proper books.’” I lift my hands, miming air quotes. “The ones with just words. I found those so boring.”

I can’t help the faint smile that crosses my lips, though it’s more bitter than fond. “I preferred drawing. I liked the pictures because I could see the stories in them. My mother never got it. She used to tell me, ‘Art will never get you anywhere, Alice. No one pays the bills with painting.’”

My voice catches slightly, and I glance down at my lap, smoothing the fabric of my dress. “She hated when I drew. Said it was just living in the clouds. And then, when I came to Wonderland... when I went back to her world...” I pause, swallowing hard. “She hated it. Hated me for it.”

Hook shifts slightly, the faint sound of his jacket brushing against the wall catching my attention. “What did she say?”

I look up, startled by the question, but there’s no mockery in his tone, no smirk waiting to follow.

“She said I was crazy. She told me to stop talking about it. Said if I didn’t, she’d cut the tree down.”

“The tree?”

“The one in the garden,” I explain. “It’s where... well, where I thought the door was. She said if I kept going on about it, she’d get rid of it. Make sure I couldn’t ‘escape’ anymore.”

Hook’s brow furrows slightly, and for a moment, I think he’s going to say something. But he doesn’t. He just watches me, and somehow, it feels like enough.

“I stopped drawing after that,” I continue, my throat tightening. “Stopped... everything, really. I went to school, got a degree, got a job. I did all the things she wanted, all the things she said would make me ‘normal.’” I let out a shaky laugh. “And look where that’s got me. Right back here.”

There’s a long pause, and when Hook speaks, “Maybe you were never meant to be ‘normal.’”

I blink at him, my chest tightening at the simple sincerity in his words. “What does that even mean?”

“It means,” he says, leaning back against the wall, “that maybe you’re exactly who you’re supposed to be. And maybe she was wrong.”

I don't know what to say to that. For once, his cocky bravado is gone, replaced by something gentler. Something that makes my heart ache just a little.

And for the first time in a long time, I don't feel so alone.

Chapter Forty-Six

HOOK

I'M NOT sure why our heads do it—some cruel, twisted trick our brains like to play when it's too quiet. Like, *Hey, remember all that rubbish you went through? Fancy reliving it in graphic detail?* No. No, I bloody don't. The first time was bad enough. But here I am, stuck with it.

There are just some things in life that won't leave, no matter how hard I try to shove them down. And I should be able to shove them away. I'm me. Captain sodding Hook. But sounds, smells, moments—they cling, burrow deep, and claw their way back to the surface when you least expect it.

This place reeks of damp earth and decay, the kind that seeps into your bones and stays there. It's too damn close to that place.

I lean against the wall, legs stretched out in front of me, arms folded over my chest. Sitting here in silence isn't doing me any favours, but there's nothing else to do. I've already turned over every escape option a hundred times in my head. There isn't a way out—not yet.

I sigh and close my eyes, forcing the memories back.

This is bloody stupid.

At this rate, when I get back to Neverland, it'll be just as rotten as Wonderland is. The sky will be dark, the stars gone. Pete will look like an old man. Wendy...

I never should've sent Smee to find the amulet. I should've gone myself.

When I open my eyes again, Alice is sitting cross-legged a few feet away, her head bowed over my knife. She's using it to carve into the dirt floor. At first, it's aimless—random shapes and swirls—but there's something almost calming about it.

I watch her in silence, the scrape of metal on earth ... It's almost rhythmic, the steady drag of my knife as she carves into the dirt. Eventually, she speaks, her voice soft but clear, though she doesn't lift her gaze.

"I keep wondering if anyone's missing me back home," she says. "If they've even noticed I'm gone." She pauses, dragging the knife in a slow, deliberate circle. "Time works differently here, doesn't it?" Her voice dips slightly, as if she's asking more for reassurance than confirmation. "The last time I was here, it felt like weeks. But when I went back home, it'd only been hours. No one even noticed I was gone. They just thought I'd been off playing. I..."

Her bitter laugh cuts through the quiet, sharp and raw. She takes a breath, shaking her head. "Ignore me. I'm just talking."

But then she looks at me. Her eyes catch something in the faint glow of the light she summoned earlier, and there's a rawness there that twists something deep in my chest before I can shove it aside.

"I think..." Her voice trembles, and she hesitates, as if forcing the words out will make them too real. "Part of me hopes time passes differently again. That I do miss my gran's funeral. That I don't have to see it."

Her voice wavers on the last word, cracking just enough that I feel it. For a second, I don't know what to say. It's not like I'm good at this—comforting people, offering soft reassurances. That's not my role. I'm the one who keeps things sharp and distant, the one who's always ready with a quip to deflect the pain away.

I'm not good at this—the quiet confessions, the raw, vulnerable moments. They make my skin itch because I've got nothing to offer but blunt truth. In a world full of cynicism, the best I can do is not make it worse.

And yet, there's something about her sitting there, dirt smudged on her hands, her voice steady even as her eyes give her away. Something that makes me want to say something. Something that won't leave more scars.

“Funerals are for the living,” I say finally, my voice softer than I mean it to be. “Not for the dead.”

Her lips press together, and she looks away, dragging the knife harder into the dirt.

“Maybe your grandmother would’ve understood,” I add, leaning my head back against the wall. “If she’s the way you’ve described, she’d probably tell you to skip it anyway.”

A small smile flickers across her face, though it doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “She would’ve, actually. She’d have told me to go to the pub and get drunk. Not out of sorrow, mind you—out of having a good time. Or she’d have told me to go do something magical. Something stupid. Like grab a ridiculous latte from some café and lose myself in a book.”

I have no idea what a latte is, but I nod.

Alice exhales slowly, her shoulders relaxing just a little, and we both go quiet again, letting time pass.

I close my eyes, the smell of the earth nudging at me. For a moment, I’m back there, in that cramped space, counting the minutes until my uncle got bored of tossing scraps down. Counting until the day he finally didn’t.

The memories are heavy, tugging at the edges of my mind, and somewhere in that haze of thoughts and non-plans, sleep catches me.

When I blink my eyes open, the dim light hasn’t changed. But Alice isn’t sitting where she was before.

The spot where she was drawing in the dirt is empty, and my muscles tense. It’s a reflex I can’t shake. But then I see her crouched by the bars, her hands pressed against the mud-caked walls, her shoulders hunched.

She’s muttering to herself, voice low and thick with frustration.

I stay still, watching her. There’s something raw about the way her fingers dig into the earth, the way her forehead bows against the bars. Like she’s trying to claw her way out with sheer force of will.

If only that were enough.

“So stupid,” she whispers, her voice trembling. “Stupid, stupid Alice.”

She presses her forehead harder against the bars, her knuckles white as she grips the cold metal. Her breath shakes, and the faint flicker of her light casts erratic shadows over her face.

“Break apart,” she whispers, her voice cracking. She rocks forward, her forehead brushing the bars again. “Just break. Get us out of here.”

Something about the scene cuts through me in a way I don't expect. Maybe it's the vulnerability in her voice. Or the clawing desperation that spills out of her, raw and jagged.

Or maybe it's because I've been there.

I've been where she is—feeling useless, powerless, and trapped. I've shouted myself hoarse, my voice raw as I pounded against walls that wouldn't budge. I begged, apologised, promised, screamed for my uncle to open the damn door.

But no one came.

I don't move though. Not yet. There's a part of me that knows if I do, she'll shut down. She'll put up her walls, and not test her magic. She needs this moment, this time.

She's a little bit like me, I suppose.

Her hand lifts, fingers trembling slightly as she presses them into the mud. The light in her palm flickers with uncertainty, casting faint ripples through the darkness.

"Come on," she breathes, voice barely audible. "Work. Just do something. Anything."

For a moment, nothing happens. The light in her hands grows dimmer, faltering like it might wink out entirely. I watch as her shoulders tense, her breath catching in the stillness. Then, just as she's about to pull back, the mud shifts. Barely anything—a tiny clump crumbles away from the surface and skitters to the ground.

She doesn't notice me stir, doesn't see me prop myself up slightly against the wall. The movement is slow, deliberate, so I don't startle her.

"What are you doing, love?" I ask.

Alice snaps her head around, the light between her fingers flaring brighter for a brief moment. "I was just..." She stops herself, the frustration on her face shifting into something closer to shame. "I'm trying to do *something*."

Her gaze flickers down to her hands, still braced against the mud-streaked bars. "I thought maybe I could break it, use the magic, but all I seem to do is create these stupid lights. And they're useless."

"Useless?" I raise an eyebrow, shifting forward slightly. "I don't think so."

"They are," she says sharply, cutting me off before I can argue. "I can't get it open. I've been trying for ages. Nothing's working. Sure, I have

magic, but it's pathetic. Look at this."

She clicks her fingers several times, and little sparks shoot up into the air like a miniature fireworks display. They rise higher and higher, glittering as they drift up through the hole we fell through. For a moment, it's spectacular—brilliant streaks of light in the dark. But she slumps down, shaking her head.

"That's all I can do," she mutters bitterly.

Before I can respond, she flings her hand back, almost in frustration. But this time, the light she conjures is different. It's not just a spark or a flicker—it's a ball of energy that bursts out from her palm and shoots through the bars, illuminating what's on the other side.

I scramble up, my breath catching at the sight it reveals. "Alice," I say, my voice sharper now. "There's a tunnel."

She blinks, as if not quite believing it herself, then leans closer to peer through the bars. "Yeah," she breathes. "And that means if there's a tunnel, there's a way out of this bloody thing."

"Exactly." I spring to my feet, rushing over to her, and grab the knife she's left on the ground. "Get the mud off," I say, already jamming the blade into the wall. "There has to be something behind here."

For once, she doesn't argue, doesn't throw a sharp remark or question me. She digs her hands into the mud alongside me, clawing and scraping as I work the blade into the packed earth.

The mud falls away in clumps, thick and damp, coating our hands and arms. But with each layer we strip back, the edge of something metallic gleams faintly in the dim light.

"Keep going," I urge, my tone clipped. The knife slips against the mud, slicing through it as more of the structure behind the bars comes into view.

"It's a gate."

"No," I correct, peering closer as I dig at the edges. "It's a hatch."

Her eyes widen, and she redoubles her efforts, her fingers digging into the crevices as I work to loosen the edges. The metallic surface glints brighter now, a faint shimmer of hope in the suffocating dark.

"Please tell me this thing opens," she mutters under her breath, shoving at the edges with renewed desperation.

"It'll open," I say, more to myself than to her. "It has to."

Because if it doesn't?

We're dead.

Chapter Forty-Seven

ALICE

IT OPENS—KIND of. If opening means the edge shifts just a fraction, creaking like it hasn't moved in years. Hook grabs the bars, his jaw tight as he pulls. I step in beside him, my hands gripping the cold, mud-caked metal. Together, we strain against the hatch's stubborn resistance.

"Pull," Hook growls through gritted teeth.

"I am," I snap back. My arms burn, my back aches, but I don't let up. I throw everything I have into it because this place is everything we have. My feet are planted firmly in the dirt, my grip tightening as I pour every ounce of strength into the effort.

The hatch groans, just slightly, but it's enough to spark a flicker of hope. My heart leaps, maybe a little too early, but I let it, even as my muscles scream.

"It's moving," I gasp, feeling the metal shift under the strain of our combined effort. "It's actually moving."

"Don't stop." Hook braces himself harder, his heels digging into the dirt. He lets out a guttural shout, his teeth clenched as he pulls so hard the veins in his neck stand out like cords.

I follow his lead, pushing past the pain in my arms. The metal screeches in protest, every inch gained a fight, but the gap widens just enough. A rush of cold, sour air hits me—damp and foul. It smells like freedom.

“Come on, you stubborn bloody thing,” Hook barks, giving it everything he has. “Fucking come on.”

And then, with one final heave, the gate moves enough that we might actually get through.

Hook lets go first, stumbling back as though the thing has thrown him. He rubs his hands together, panting. “Goddamn thing,” he mutters, his eyes narrowing at the gap. “That’s going to have to do.”

I stumble back too, wiping grime from my hands, though at this point, it hardly matters. My dress is already ruined. “You think we can fit through there?” I ask, eyeing the narrow opening.

Hook glances at me, his lips twitching into a grin. “Well,” he drawls, “it’s about all we’re getting. You could always slip out of that dress. Might make it easier for you.”

I glare at him, refusing to give him the satisfaction. “No.”

He shrugs, but his grin widens. “Suit yourself.”

Rolling my eyes, I step closer to the opening, peering through into the tunnel beyond. It’s cramped, barely more than a crawlspace, but it’s the way out. “After you, Captain,” I say, waving him forward.

“Never let it be said Hook isn’t chivalrous.” He bends to squeeze through the gap. “I see you’re finally learning some manners.”

“Just go,” I mutter, crossing my arms as he ducks into whatever is behind the gate—a tunnel, I think.

His broad shoulders barely clear the opening, and for a second, I’m sure he’s going to get stuck. But with a grunt, he vanishes into the darkness. His voice echoes back to me. “Well, you coming? Or do I need to carry you through?”

Shaking my head, I huff and follow him.

The air inside is damp and stifling, the walls pressing in uncomfortably close. Wonderland really isn’t a place for anyone with claustrophobia—or any phobia, for that matter. Maybe that’s why everyone here is so mad. Maybe the place drives them to it, and madness is just how they cope.

My hands scrape against the rough stone as I crawl forward, my knees sinking into the wet, uneven ground. “This is disgusting.”

“A means to an end, love,” Hook calls back, his voice annoyingly calm.

I press on into the darkness, just able to make out Hook ahead of me. But then he stops suddenly, without warning, and I nearly crash into him.

“Could you not?” I snap, but he raises a hand to silence me.

“Don’t you—” I start, but his hand clamps over my mouth as he presses into me, pushing me back.

“Stop talking for once.”

I’m about to argue, ready with some sarcastic quip, but then I hear it. A faint skittering sound—claws scraping against stone. My heart skips a beat before hammering painfully in my chest.

“Oh no.” My voice is barely above a whisper. “Please tell me that’s just an echo.”

Hook glances down at me, his sharp eyes locking onto mine. There’s no humour in them now, no sly grin or mocking glint. He shakes his head, his expression grim. “Afraid not.”

Brilliant. Absolutely bloody brilliant.

The sound grows louder, closer with each echoing click. My breath catches, my throat tightening. Hook’s jaw is clenched, his gaze darting down the dim passage ahead of us. Instinctively, I step back, but his hand grips my arm firmly, holding me in place. His entire body tenses, like a coiled spring, ready to snap into action.

A dull thud reverberates behind us, sharp enough to make me jump. Hook flinches too, just slightly, and I feel the movement through his hand. Maybe it’s instinct, or maybe there really is a gentleman buried somewhere beneath all that bravado, but he twists, positioning himself between me and whatever’s coming. His hand drops to the knife at his hip, steady and deliberate.

The footsteps grow louder, echoing through the oubliette we’ve just escaped. A flicker of light begins to spill through the darkness—not ours, something else. My stomach churns, and without thinking, I reach out, my hand gripping Hook’s waist as I pull him back with me.

The scrape of metal fills the passage, and then she appears.

A woman steps into view, tall and striking, with fiery red curls that bounce even in the dim light. Her eyes, sharp and green as fresh leaves, cut straight into mine. She strides forward with an unsettling calm, her movements fluid and unnervingly graceful. Her clothing—a patchwork of leather and fabric—looks like it was salvaged from a dozen different lives.

“Who the hell are you?” Hook snaps, his body shifting to square up to her, his tone hard.

She arches an eyebrow, her lips curling into a smirk that practically screams challenge. “You two are throwing lights around like a bloody fireworks display, and you’re asking *me* who I am?” Her voice is low and rich, laced with a mocking edge that grates against my nerves.

I narrow my eyes, suspicion prickling at the back of my neck. “You’re a hatter,” I say.

Before she can respond, Hook scoffs, stepping slightly closer to me. “No flies on you today,” he mutters.

I shoot him a glare, but of course, he doesn’t care.

The woman gives a small, theatrical bow, brushing a red curl off her shoulder. “Sophia,” she says smoothly. Her gaze shifts to Hook. “And you must be the infamous Captain Hook.”

I swear Hook growls, a low rumble in his chest. His scowl deepens, and he towers over her. “Enough with the introductions. What do you want?”

Sophia tilts her head, utterly unfazed by his hostility. These two are either a perfect match or destined to kill each other. Their egos are practically sparking off one another.

“Thorin sent me,” she says.

The name sends a jolt through me, and I take a step back, my breath catching in my throat. “Thorin?” I whisper.

Hook’s scowl sharpens, his voice laced with venom. “The Queen’s butcher?”

Sophia sighs, rolling her eyes as though she’s heard it all before. “The Queen’s *guard*,” she corrects. “And yes, he sent me. Saw the little light show you two were putting on. Honestly, you might as well have sent an engraved invitation saying, ‘Here we are. Come and get us.’”

Hook’s lip curls, his grip tightening on his blade. “Thorin sent you?” he repeats. “Forgive me, love, if that sounds a bit strange. What exactly did he send you for? To take us in? Cut us down? Is he so yellow-bellied he couldn’t come himself and had to send...” He pauses, giving her a slow, disdainful once-over. “...you in his place. What a fine man he must be.”

Sophia doesn’t flinch. She crosses her arms over her chest, squaring up to him without hesitation. “You make a lot of assumptions, Captain. No, I’m not here to take you in. I’m here to help you.”

“And why would you do that?” Hook’s voice is a sharp edge. “Why would the Queen’s guard send someone to *help* us?”

She takes a beat, her expression unreadable. “Not all the guards are as loyal to the Queen as she might think.”

My stomach twists painfully.

“Convenient,” Hook says. “Her prized hound has suddenly grown a conscience?”

Sophia exhales sharply, irritation flashing across her face. “Oh, spare me your cynicism, Captain. No, Thorin’s no saint, but even he has limits. We all do. Wonderland has been rotting under the Queen’s rule for years.” Her gaze flicks to me, and her words falter, as if she knows something she’s reluctant to say.

Hook doesn’t miss it. He steps closer, towering over her. “And?” he presses. “What aren’t you saying, love?”

Sophia’s expression shifts, her smirk fading. For a moment, there’s something raw in her eyes—sadness, pain. “Not everything you see is as it seems. Not everything is as it should be.”

“Riddles?”

“No.” She shakes her head, a small, bitter laugh escaping her lips. “There’s so much that can’t be spoken. So many words that stick in my throat.”

Maybe Hook’s patience is running thin, because he closes the distance between them, his voice hard. “So Thorin sent you, is that right? Not to help us, but to help himself?”

“To help Wonderland,” she says firmly. “To help every world—including yours, Captain. Or are you not here to save your precious Neverland? He heard you tell her—your magic is fading. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?”

Hook’s knuckles whiten around the hilt of his dagger, and I glance between them, my pulse pounding.

“And you,” I ask softly. “What’s your part in all of this? You’re risking your life to be here, right? If the Queen—”

“If the Queen hears me, sees me, then yes. My end will whisper through the hearts of her people for a long time. But her reign is taking us to ruin. Now is the time for bravery, not cowardice. Or she’ll snuff out every light, every piece of us.”

She reaches into her pocket and pulls out something small and intricate. At first, I think it's a compass, but as she holds it up, I see it's something else entirely. A crystal face shimmers above swirling brass cogs and gears, turning beneath the surface. At its centre is a tiny hourglass, its grains of sand slipping too quickly, too erratically.

Sophia thrusts it towards us. "There's not much sand left. Do you see? The grains fall too fast, too slow—they're wrong. Wonderland is fading, its magic disappearing into the madness you see. Wonder is turning into nightmare. The flowers speak of death. The trees whisper their silence. Soon, there will be nothing left."

Her piercing green eyes lock onto mine. "You left," she says softly but pointedly. "You're the right Alice, but you left us. And now the Queen clings to her throne, but—"

Hook cuts her off with a sharp glare. "Enough," he snaps.

Sophia draws a deep breath, steadying herself. "Wonderland needs your help," she says. "If you die, Wonderland is lost."

Hook lets out a low, dry laugh. "Yes, well, love, that's all very touching, and my heart bleeds, truly, but I am not about to trust one of the Queen's lackeys."

Sophia's jaw tightens, but she doesn't flinch. Her green eyes flash, sharp and unyielding. "I'm no one's lackey," she says coldly. "I've lost as much to the Queen's reign as anyone. My family is gone. My home, dust. Everything..." Her voice falters briefly before she squares her shoulders, her gaze snapping back to me. "You left us. That is why I do not bow. I will not bow."

Bow? I don't know what she means, but it doesn't matter.

Hook steps closer, forcing her to take a step back. "Stop," he says, his voice low and dangerous.

She raises her chin, refusing to back down. "You sought the Queen's assistance. Does that not also make you, her lackey?"

"I work for no one," Hook snarls.

Sophia's gaze flicks past him, landing squarely on me. "The Queen's grip—tight like chains, desperate like drowning," she says, her words quick and strange. "She drains the magic from this world, drop by drop, to fill her own bottomless cup. Immortality is her anchor, her lifeline, but it frays. Threads unravel, unspool. And you..." Her voice softens, tilting her head slightly. "You are the thread she fears most."

I swallow hard, my chest tightening. "I'm nothing to her."

Sophia's eyes narrow, and she steps closer, ignoring Hook entirely now. "Nothing?" she echoes, her tone sharp and cutting. "A girl who leaves her shadow on the walls of Wonderland? Who bends light and magic without even knowing? No, not nothing. *Everything.*"

Her words crawl under my skin, unsettling and raw. Hook growls, his patience visibly wearing thin. "Enough riddles, Hatter. If you've got something to say, say it plainly."

Sophia's lips curl into a humourless smile. "Plain? Plain is for teacups, Captain. The truth does not fit in a cup. It spills, leaks, floods. And your truth? Oh, it's drowning you already."

Hook's hand twitches, the tension radiating off him. "Try me."

Sophia's smile fades, and for a moment, the tunnel is silent, the air thick with unspoken words. Then, softly, she says, "The Queen hunts you because she fears you. Both of you. Together, you are her undoing." She looks back at me, her voice quieter but no less intense. "You are the thread that unravels the tapestry. And him?" She gestures to Hook without breaking eye contact. "He is the knife to cut it loose."

"And what does that make you?" Hook snarls. "A needle to stitch us up, or a pawn in her game?"

Sophia straightens, her green eyes glinting with determination. "I am neither," she says firmly. "I am the broken clock, ticking backwards, forwards, never quite right. I am the mirror that shows what you do not want to see. And I am here because, like it or not, Captain, you cannot do this alone."

She turns back to me, her gaze softer now but still piercing. "Wonderland dies without you. And without Wonderland, everything else falls. The Hollowlands, Neverland, all of it. Threads pulled, knots untied. Chaos."

Hook mutters something under his breath, but I can't make it out. My mind is spinning, her words tangling in my thoughts like thorns.

Sophia holds up the strange compass again. "The sands fall too fast, too slow. Wonderland twists, bends, breaks. The Queen feeds off its magic, and the balance tips further. Soon, there will be no Wonderland left to save. Only ruins, only nightmares." Her voice drops, trembling slightly. "I cannot let that happen."

I glance at Hook. His expression is unreadable, his jaw tight, his eyes shadowed. But he doesn't argue. Not yet.

"And what if we say no?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

Sophia tilts her head, her curls catching the dim light as her smile returns, sharp and knowing. "Then you'll die," she says simply. "And Wonderland will die with you."

Chapter Forty-Eight

HOOK

THE SKITTERING STARTS UP AGAIN—THE same bloody spine-chilling sound as before. It echoes down the tunnel, sharp and relentless, claws scraping on stone and getting closer with every damn second.

Alice stiffens beside me, her body wound tight, and I catch the subtle way she steps back. She probably doesn't even realise she's done it—moving closer into my space.

"It's not just me hearing that, right?" she whispers.

"No," I say, my hand instinctively going for the hilt of my dagger.

The sound doesn't just crawl through the tunnel—it burrows into my skull, sharp and jagged, setting my nerves on edge.

Alice glances at me, her eyes wide, even in this dim light. "Do you think it's more spiders?"

"Oh, I'd bet my last bloody coin it is." And I'm ready for them. I'll hack off their big, hairy legs, gut their bellies—take the bastards apart one by one.

"It's the maze," Sophia says, her voice calm, like we're discussing the weather. "It winds all the way around this place. I'm surprised you made it this far without falling into one of the Forgetting Wells."

"Forgetting Wells?" That's a fitting name. Exactly what my uncle had in mind when he threw me in one.

"There are plenty scattered about," she continues. "More in the maze itself, but we should go back this way. The way you two were heading is

just more of a deadend. Come.”

As much as I don’t trust her, the idea of staying here with that noise creeping up on us isn’t exactly appealing. I hate following anyone else’s lead, but for now, survival takes priority. We retreat into the main part of the oubliette—or Forgetting Well, whatever she’s calling it. Alice’s light floats alongside us, though I’m not even sure she realises she’s still holding it. She’s oblivious to a lot of things, I’ve noticed. Still, I’ll give her this—she’s paying attention to Sophia and to this damned oubliette like she’s seeing it for the first time. I find that intriguing.

“How do we get out of here?” Alice asks, staring up at the hole we fell through—the same one Sophia must have lowered herself down.

“Through there.” Sophia tilts her head, her red curls shifting slightly. “Why didn’t you summon a light rope?” she asks, so matter-of-fact it’s almost insulting.

I raise an eyebrow, glancing between Alice and Sophia. “A what now?”

“A light rope,” she says with exaggerated patience, stepping closer and snapping her fingers right in front of my face.

I don’t flinch. Not a bloody chance.

Alice furrows her brow and mimics the motion, pressing her fingers together like she’s about to perform some great mythical feat. Nothing happens.

Sophia lets out an exaggerated sigh, rolling her eyes as if we’re dim-witted children. I don’t care for it.

“Not like that. It takes intent, darling,” she says. “Magic isn’t about waving your hands around and hoping for the best. It’s about knowing what you want and pulling it from the threads of this place.”

Her eyes flick to me past Alice, and I can feel the judgment radiating off her. “Did you not even try to teach her?”

“I have no magic, remember?” I say, clicking my fingers. A weak, pathetic flare of light sputters and dies in my palm. “Nothing. Exactly why I’m here.”

“It’s fine,” Alice says quickly, the words rushing out as if she’s trying to save face. “It’s not like I have magic either. I’m just—” She makes another attempt, mimicking Sophia’s earlier movements. Her fingers press together, pulling apart with a tentative gesture. And this time, something happens. A spark ignites between her hands, flaring into life. It’s small at first, like a flame catching on kindling, but it grows rapidly—thick, bright,

and burning with a fierce intensity. “Oh?” Alice breathes, staring at the light in disbelief.

I step closer, the heat of it brushing against my skin. It’s tempting, like holding a weapon you’re not entirely sure won’t explode in your hands. There’s something alive in that glow, sharp and wild, and Alice is holding it like she doesn’t know whether to be proud or terrified.

“Not bad,” I say, my voice low. “Now, don’t just stand there gawking at it. Own it.”

Her gaze flicks to me, startled. “Own it?”

“Yes, love. It’s yours, isn’t it? Or are you planning on letting it fizzle out while you second-guess yourself?”

She narrows her eyes at me, and there’s a flicker of defiance in them. Good. She’ll need that.

“I wasn’t second-guessing,” she mutters, her grip tightening as the light steadies, pulsing between her hands like a heartbeat.

“Prove it,” I say, stepping back. “Put it to use. Show me this wasn’t just a fluke.”

“Throw it up into the hole,” Sophia says. “Imagine what you want it to become.”

Her lips press together in determination. She takes a breath, her hands moving with more confidence now. The light shifts, no longer wild and untamed but bending to her will. With a flick of her wrist, she throws it upwards.

The light arcs into the air, burning a path through the darkness above us. For a moment, nothing happens. Then, like glitter cascading from a shattered star, the light splinters and twists, coming together piece by piece.

It solidifies into the shape of a ladder, each rung glowing faintly but unmistakably solid.

Sophia waves a hand in a casual, *there you go* gesture. “See? Not so hard.”

I ignore her, my attention fixed on Alice. She’s staring at the ladder, her chest rising and falling as she catches her breath. “I did that.”

“Not bad at all,” I say.

Sophia steps back, her green eyes glinting with amusement as she gestures towards the ladder. “After you, Captain.”

I narrow my eyes at her, my hand resting on my dagger. “And leave Alice down here alone with you? I don’t think so. You go first.” This isn’t about being protective. Not at all. But I’ve been with Alice these past few days—I know her. I don’t know Sophia, and by her own admission, she’s tied to Thorin. I’m not about to trust one of the Queen’s people with Alice no matter what she claims. “You go first, then me, then Alice,” I say firmly.

Sophia stares at me, her bright green eyes narrowing ever so slightly. The corners of her lips curl into a smirk as she steps closer, leaning in just enough to make me bristle. “Careful, Captain,” she purrs, trailing her fingers up my chest with deliberate slowness. “The world might think you actually care about something.”

I grab her hand, pushing it firmly away. “I do, love. Myself.” I gesture towards the ladder. “Now, ladies first.”

Although the ladder is made of light, it’s oddly solid—like wood, but glowing as though spun from thread. It makes no sense, but I don’t question it. What does it matter? As long as it gets the job done and we get out of this fucking hole, the thing could be made of paper for all I care.

When I step onto the firm ground above—where we fell—I take a moment to glance around. As Alice climbs up, I head to the door we came through when we were running from whatever the hell that machine was.

The place feels different now. The massive, menacing machine is gone, and the hedges are neat, trimmed and perfect, not a leaf out of place. It’s unsettling—like someone came along and scrubbed away all the chaos, leaving behind the wrong kind of order.

Alice pulls herself out of the hole, dusting herself off, her hands brushing at her dress.

As Sophia strides ahead without hesitation, she snaps her fingers, sending a row of glowing orbs into the air to light our path. The orbs hover, casting long shadows against the pristine walls of greenery.

Alice steps beside me. “Are we supposed to follow her?”

I narrow my eyes, watching Sophia ahead of us, rounding the bend. The orbs she’s conjured leave a trail behind her, like breadcrumbs for us to follow. I’m not quite ready to move yet, and maybe Alice isn’t either, because she stays beside me, silent but close enough that I can feel her warmth in the chill of this place.

“I think so,” I say, though my focus is elsewhere. I’m listening, my head tilted—not for the machine. No, I’d hear that damn thing a mile away. I’m listening for people, for an ambush, for something that might reveal this is all a trap of Sophia’s making.

Alice shifts beside me, her movement drawing my attention. Her gaze is on the path ahead, but the faint tension in her jaw tells me she’s waiting for me, for some kind of lead. She steps forward, hesitant at first, then into the middle of the path. “Are you coming?” she asks, her voice steady, though I can hear the undercurrent of doubt.

I bite down on my lip, some sarcastic comment daring to escape. But the way she stands there—alone, defiant—stalls me. There’s something captivating about her, about the way she refuses to cower even when the odds are stacked against her.

“Is there any other choice?” I finally reply.

Her lips twitch, almost a smile, and then she turns and keeps moving.

I follow Alice. We follow the lights, and as we pass each one, they blink out, leaving nothing but darkness behind us. The shadows press close, as though the maze itself is trying to swallow us whole.

It doesn’t take long to catch up with Sophia. She’s stopped ahead, waiting for us, her silhouette framed by the faint glow of her lights. “Stay close,” she says, without turning to address us. “The maze has many faces, but it remembers you.”

Alice’s steps falter beside me. I glance at her, catching the flicker of unease in her expression. Without thinking, I place a hand lightly on her arm.

She looks up at me, startled by the gesture.

“Do you actually know the way out?” I ask, my voice low as we keep walking. Sophia’s still striding ahead, and we’re following, but she’s glancing left and right, pausing just a fraction too long. Some of that confidence—the kind that says she knows exactly where she’s going—seems to be slipping.

“Of course. It’s this way—” she gestures ahead, but then stops short. Her head tilts slightly, her lips pressing into a thin line. “Oh.”

I let my shoulders slump. “A dead end? I thought you said you knew—”

“Oh, ye of little faith,” she cuts me off, striding toward a massive hedge in front of us.

I'm waiting for her to stop, to turn around, maybe even admit a sliver of defeat. But no. Without hesitation, she steps right into it. I'm not joking. Not through it—*into* it. The hedge ripples, like the bloody thing's made of water, as she vanishes.

"What in the bloody—" I start, blinking at the spot where she disappeared.

Before I can finish, her head pops back out, her green eyes flashing with a hint of amusement. "Well, are you two coming, or are you planning on standing there gawking all night?"

I glance at Alice, who looks as baffled as I feel.

"After you," I say, gesturing grandly toward the hedge with one hand, because of course, *I'm* not going first.

Alice narrows her eyes at me, the corner of her mouth twitching. "Brave of you," she mutters, her shoulder brushes mine as she passes, and it lingers—just enough for me to feel the warmth of her, even in this cursed maze. My hand twitches at my side, a reflexive urge to reach for her again. But I don't.

Instead, I watch as she steps up to the hedge, hesitates for the briefest second, then pushes through. The hedge ripples again, swallowing her like it did Sophia.

I follow.

A second later, we're out of the maze, and it's dark. Pitch dark. Middle-of-the-night dark. Not a sliver of moonlight, no stars, nothing to tell me where the hell we are. I don't even have a clue what time it is. Could be early morning, late evening—or tomorrow, for all I know. Wonderland doesn't give a damn about time, and right now, neither do I.

Everything about this place seems designed to piss me off, and it's doing a damn fine job of it.

Sophia is ahead again. Alice and I follow. Again.

"So," I say, breaking the silence. "If this is Thorin's big plan, where is he?"

"He's at the palace," Sophia replies without turning. "Doing his job and trying to keep you both out of trouble."

"You mean doing what the Queen says."

Her head tilts slightly, but she doesn't stop. "I mean keeping the Queen quiet. Keeping her sane before she sends everything she's got after you both so you can do what is needed."

“I thought... she did send everything after us,” Alice says.

“Yes, she did. And now there’s a price on your heads as well. Did you both know that?”

That makes me stop dead. “What if you’re leading us somewhere to cash that in?” I say. “Because none of this makes sense. Not a damn bit. You tell us Thorin sent you, that he’s... what? Committing treason? Is that right? Turning on his Queen?”

Sophia stops abruptly and spins to face me, her fiery hair catching the faint light. “Are you casting judgment, Captain?”

I meet her gaze, holding it steady. “Oh, I am, love. But I’m also trying to figure this out. Call it survival instincts.”

She inhales sharply, sucking in air like she’s restraining herself from snapping. “Do you know what your problem is?” she says, her voice low but cutting. “You struggle the second anyone tries to help you. I’ve only known you what—thirty minutes? And already I can see it. Would it be so hard for you to trust someone? Just once?”

“Trust is for fools,” I reply without hesitation.

“Thorin is my friend,” she says firmly. “He’s my friend, and I want to help him. He helps me. Whatever twisted ideas you’ve got about Wonderland, I can promise you—they’re probably wrong.”

“It’s a place filled with madness,” Alice says. “Where nothing makes sense.”

“No,” Sophia says sharply, her eyes narrowing on Alice. “It’s a place full of wonder, where *everything* makes sense.”

“And the rotting?” I say, gesturing to the decay around us. “The way everything’s falling apart? That makes sense to you?”

Sophia’s expression tightens, and for the first time, I see a flicker of something behind her usual confidence—anger, maybe even grief.

“Wonderland is breaking,” she says, her voice quieter but no less firm. “But it’s not the place that’s wrong. It’s the people. The Queen sits where she doesn’t belong. She takes power that isn’t hers and forces things into places they do not fit. Wonderland rebels against her. That’s why everything is falling apart. That’s why everyone is dying. Thorin isn’t loyal to the Queen. He’s loyal to the realm, to Wonderland.” She shoots Alice a hard look and then turns her gaze on me. “This is the part I don’t understand. How is our world in the hands of the two most selfish people I’ve ever met?”

“Selfish?” Alice says, raising a brow.

“Yes,” Sophia snaps. “Did you not leave? Did you not come into Wonderland, mess everything up, and then just leave?”

“No. I was a child. I—”

Sophia scoffs, her lips curling into a bitter smile. “You were the right Alice. The Queen...” She shakes her head, cutting herself off with a deep breath. “Never mind. I’m wasting my breath.”

She turns to me, her gaze hard again. “As for Thorin, he’s my friend. That’s all you need to know. He asked me to come and help you two, and I did. I trust him. I believe in him. And for some godforsaken reason, he believes in you two.”

“It doesn’t change the fact he’s one of the Queen’s guards,” I say.

“You keep saying that like it’s supposed to mean something.”

“He took an oath and he’s breaking it for his own gain.”

Sophia stares at me for a long, hard moment, her green eyes blazing. “You don’t know a thing about Thorin. What he’s done. What he’s endured. You think Wonderland is twisted now? The Queen has taken everything from us—our magic, our people, our sanity—and Thorin has been forced to carry out her every whim. He’s trapped, just like we all are.”

Her words come fast, heated now. “The Queen holds onto her power in ways you two don’t understand. You want to distrust me because I came here to save you? Fine. I don’t care. But as long as you two do what you’re supposed to—as long as you get where you need to go—that’s all that matters.”

Her voice hardens further, sharp enough to cut. “I don’t like that Wonderland is in your hands. I’d rather it be in the hands of someone who loves this place as much as we all do. But here we are.”

I narrow my eyes at her, my chest tightening. “And who thought this was a good idea, then? Whose bright idea was this?”

“Peregrine,” she says simply. “It was his idea. The craziest bloody thing we’d ever heard. But Marcellus believed in you. Said you’d do the right thing. Said you *always* do the right thing.” She looks at Alice when she says this.

Alice’s eyes narrow, her tone sharper now. “Marcellus? Peregrine? I don’t know these people.”

Sophia laughs, the sound bitter. “Of course you do, Alice. You just don’t know their real names.”

She flicks her hand, and light flares between her fingers, forming the glowing image of a blue and grey cat. Its eyes, piercing teal and green, shimmer as it moves lazily around us. Alice gasps, her voice barely above a whisper. “The Cheshire Cat...”

"Perigine" Sophia waves the image away, flicking her hand again, and a new scene appears—a long table, scattered with teapots and cups. Figures move around it, singing. Alice steps forward, her eyes locked on the vision.

“I remember this,” she whispers, moving closer to the table. It looks so real that she reaches out to touch it, her hand passing through the image like smoke. She watches as the Hatter at the head of the table announces, “It’s six o’clock.” The figures shift seats, endlessly drinking tea.

“Why is a raven like a writing desk?” Alice murmurs, her voice distant as she steps closer.

Sophia’s voice cuts through the air, sharp and bitter. “Marcellus. The Hare. He believed in you so much that he risked his life to stand against the Queen. He ended up her prisoner for it. The only reason he’s alive is Thorin. If it weren’t for him, the Queen would’ve taken his head—and the Hatter’s—long ago.”

Her gaze moves between Alice and me, her eyes burning. “So yes, Thorin is my friend. And those people at that table? They mistakenly thought you were theirs.”

"I am," Alice says.

Sophia’s voice lowers, quiet but cutting. “If you were truly Alice... you wouldn’t have left.”

Chapter Forty-Nine

ALICE

WHY DO I feel guilty when I've got absolutely nothing to feel guilty about? It's not like this is the first time someone's told me everything here is my fault, like Wonderland's gone to hell because I left. And, alright, there's a small part of me—a very quiet, very nagging part—that feels like maybe I should apologise for that. But the rest of me? The louder, sharper part? It's screaming, *What did they expect me to do?*

I mean, seriously, I was a child. A child in a world that defied all logic. In my own world, I wasn't old enough to do anything properly for myself, so why, oh why, was the responsibility of an entire bloody realm dumped on me?

I think about saying something. Maybe to Hook. Maybe to Sophia. But then I don't. What's the point? They're already chatting anyway, their voices low and clipped like they're sharing some grand secret I don't get to know. I trail behind them, silent, feeling Sophia's irritation wafting back at me like a wall. She's not even trying to hide it. It's pressing against me, making it crystal clear I'm not welcome here. Not part of their little duo or whatever they've decided this is.

Hook glances over his shoulder at me, those dark, sharp eyes of his narrowing slightly like he's trying to read my mind.

I quickly look away, focusing on the weird, shifting sky above. One second, it's black as midnight, the next, a muted sort of morning light

spills over us. Wonderland doesn't do proper daylight, apparently. Figures. Even the sky can't commit to being normal here.

I don't even know where we're going, and, honestly, I don't care. It's already obvious Sophia doesn't like me, and that's fine. She can join the list. My mum's at the top, so what's one more?

And yet... I do care. Which is stupid. Why the hell do I care what some stranger thinks of me? The thought claws at me, poking at something raw. I hug my arms around myself, trying to shove the feeling away, to bury it under all the other rubbish piling up in my head since I got here. But it doesn't go. It just lingers.

"You alright back there, love?" Hook calls, his voice casual, but there's an edge to it. Like he's testing me. Or teasing me. Probably both.

"Fine," I say, shrugging.

He raises an eyebrow, and there it is—the smirk. That smirk. The one that makes me want to slap it clean off his face. "You sure about that?"

"I'm great," I deadpan. "Never better."

"You two are—" Sophia starts, but she doesn't finish. She stops walking instead, her head tilting, her whole body going stiff.

I catch up, stepping beside Hook, frowning. "What is it?"

And then I feel it. A ripple. Subtle at first, just a faint tremor underfoot, enough to make the pebbles on the path jump and jitter. Then it grows. A deep rumble rolls through the ground, alive and unsettling. The hedges around us shiver, their leaves trembling, some breaking free and scattering like startled birds. It's like we're in the middle of a storm—only the air is perfectly still.

"What now?" Hook says, his boots planted wide like he's trying to steady himself, but I can hear it in his voice. He's uneasy.

Before anyone can answer, the ground heaves, a violent jolt that sends me stumbling forward. Instinctively, I reach out, gripping Hook's arm for balance. His hand clamps onto mine, firm and steady, though he doesn't say a word.

"Is this normal?" I ask, glancing at Sophia. She's trying to keep her balance too, her movements quick as she scans the area. Her green eyes are sharp and focused, like she's trying to figure out what the hell is happening.

She doesn't answer straight away. The ripple builds, undulating like the dirt path itself is breathing. The quaking grows louder, stronger, and

then—*boom*.

It's not a sharp sound, not sudden. It's deep and resonant, like the beating of some massive unseen heart. The sound vibrates through the air, pressing against my chest and stealing the breath right out of my lungs. Everything feels heavy, alive, like the world itself is holding its breath.

"What in bloody hell was that?" Hook mutters, his voice low, his hand already at the hilt of his dagger like that's going to do anything against... whatever this is.

Sophia pulls the strange contraption she carries from her coat. Her hands are trembling as she holds it, her eyes fixed on the swirling gears inside. The hourglass in its centre spins wildly, the sand inside pouring out too fast, almost violently. "This is not good," she mutters, more to herself than us.

"Well, no kidding," I say. "What's not good?"

She doesn't answer, her gaze darting to the sky. A low, guttural screech cuts through the air, unearthly and sharp, like nails dragged over metal. The sound makes my skin crawl, and I instinctively move closer to Hook.

"What the hell is *that*?" I whisper.

Sophia's expression darkens, and for the first time since we met her, she looks genuinely rattled. "The Queen's minions," she says. "But not the bats. Something worse."

The screeching grows louder, closer, and I glance up. Dark shadows zip across the hazy sky, their shapes twisting and fluttering unnaturally.

"Move," Sophia snaps, grabbing my arm and yanking me forward. "Right now."

There's no time to argue. She pushes Hook and me off the path, driving us toward a wall of twisted, gnarled trees. The shadows overhead grow thicker, darker, the screeches slicing through the air. Against my better judgement, I glance up, and immediately wish I hadn't.

The creatures are enormous, their leathery wings spanning wide enough to blot out the sky. Their glowing eyes burn faintly, like dying embers, as they swoop and circle, hunting.

"Keep moving," Sophia hisses, her urgency snapping me back to reality. She herds us beneath the canopy of trees, the shadows thickening until we're shrouded in near darkness. She leads us to a cluster of massive roots and shoves us down into a hollow beneath them.

“Stay low,” she orders, her tone sharp and leaving no room for argument.

I crouch beside Hook, my heart pounding so loudly I’m sure it’ll give us away. The air is thick and damp, pressing against me.

As we crouch in the shadows, Sophia pulls out the timepiece again, her fingers trembling as she studies it. The contraption spins wildly, the gears clanking like they’re about to break.

“The Queen watches with eyes everywhere,” she mutters, tucking it back into her coat. Then she looks at us, her expression grim. “I can’t go any further with you.”

“What?” The word bursts out of me before I can stop it, sharp with surprise. “Why not?”

Her expression hardens. “You both need to go on your own. If I come with you, I’m putting everyone else in danger. I can’t do that.”

I blink at her, trying to process her words. “I don’t even know where we’re going,” I say, panic slipping into my voice. “You’re the one who’s been leading us.”

“You have the map,” she says simply, her gaze flicking to Hook.

Hook scowls, his jaw tightening. “The map that’s been about as useful as well ... something not very useful,” he says.

Sophia steps forward, holding out her hand. “Show it to me.”

He hesitates, his sharp gaze darting between her and me, then back again. “It’s fine how it is.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” I snap, exasperated. “Just give her the damn map.”

Hook lets out an audible *huff* before yanking the map from his coat pocket. He shoves it into Sophia’s waiting hand, his movements stiff with irritation.

Sophia unfolds it carefully, her lips curling into a faint, humourless smile as she studies it. “No wonder you got yourself stuck in that bloody maze,” she mutters. “You’re looking at it all wrong.”

Chapter Fifty

HOOK

I RAISE A BROW AT HER. "Don't be ridiculous. How am I reading a map wrong?" I snatch it back and practically wave it at her, thrusting it in her direction. "It's a bloody map. It isn't exactly hard to read. You're here, you want to go here, and oh look," I say, jabbing my finger at the image. "You follow the paths until you get there. Boom, done, map read."

She's staring at me, her tongue playing inside her cheek as she leans on one hip. "Or," she says, going to grab it back, but I swipe it right out of her reach. She lunges again, then raises a brow, and holds her hand out. I give her the map.

"You remember that you, my friend, are in Wonderland, and here, you read maps in a different way." And then she puts the map back to her face, wrapping it around her face and nodding. "There. Now I can read it."

"That is not how you read a map. You can't even see a bloody thing with it wrapped round your head. Did you take a knock to the head by chance?"

She doesn't dignify that with a response. Instead, she offers me the map. "Try it yourself, Mr I-Know-Everything."

I bow. "Thank you."

She scowls at me. "Don't be smart. Take the bloody map and put it over your face."

I stare at her, then the map, and then back at her. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. Just do it. You think I'm doing it wrong. Try it my way."

I let out a breath. "You've lost it, you know that? And where the hell are we? Is this even the way to wherever it is we're supposed to go?" I realise how stupid that sounds because, yes, I have been following the map that Merrik's daughter drew for us, and yes, I have been reading it my way—the right way—but I'm not even sure which way we've gone and which way Madam-I-Don't-Know-What-The-Hell has decided to take us.

"Just put it over your face. We don't have the time to argue about it."

I grit my teeth, biting back a snarl. "Fine." With a growl of irritation, I lift the map and press it to my face.

And then... everything shifts.

The lines blur and twist, reshaping themselves into layers that ripple and glow, as though the map is actually alive.

"What in the hell?" I lower the map, expecting to see—I don't even know what—something. Alice is staring at me. Sophia just has a smug look about her. But I'm buggered if I'm going to say she's right.

"Is this some Wonderland trick? Am I inhaling some kind of drug and hallucinating?"

"What do you see?" Alice asks.

I hesitate, the image of her—radiant, powerful—seared into my mind. It's not something I'm about to unpack, not here, not now, especially not with her staring at me like that.

"Nothing useful," I say at last, yanking the map back over my face.

Because I see her. Alice.

Not the Alice who's been irritating me for days, all sharp words and stubborn defiance. No, this is someone else entirely. This Alice—she's something else. Radiant. Commanding. She stands tall, her presence filling the space like it was made for her. Like she belongs to this world in a way I never could to mine, no matter how long I've been there. Wonderland bends to her, the way Neverland never bends to me.

Her hair shimmers faintly, catching the fractured light of this twisted world, but it's not just her appearance. It's the way the air shifts around her, charged with something electric. The glow of Wonderland's magic bends toward her, as if it's drawn to her. Alive in a way I can't explain.

Her eyes burn with something raw, untamed—a kind of magic that doesn't come from spells or potions. It's innate, as though it lives in her

veins. It thrums with the same chaotic rhythm as this world itself, dangerous yet intoxicating. I want to reach out, to feel that energy, to let it take hold of me if only to understand what it means. She's not just Alice. She's something more. I don't have the words for it, but I feel it in my very bones.

Sophia notices my reaction, of course. How could she not? She nods, but there's no arrogance in it, no smug smirk. Just understanding, like she's been waiting for me to see it all along. But I can't take my eyes off Alice. The magic pouring off her is enough to leave me breathless, even as it leaves her completely unaware.

"What?" she asks, her frown deepening. "Why are you staring at me like that? Have I grown another head?"

I can't answer. The image of her—that Alice—lingers in my mind, burned there like a brand.

Sophia steps in front of me, breaking the moment. Her expression is maddeningly calm. "You see the way now, don't you?" she asks, her tone soft but insistent.

I finally manage to look at her, though it takes effort. My voice is low, tight. "What the hell is this? What did you make me see?"

Sophia doesn't flinch. Doesn't waver. "The truth," she says simply. So sure of herself. So damn calm.

Chapter Fifty-One

ALICE

HOOK LOOKS ridiculous with the map wrapped around his head like that. But I don't get the chance to tease him, because before I know it, there's a thunderous sound that makes the ground vibrate. Sophia's arm shoots out, shoving me back. I stumble, startled by the force.

"What in the—"

"Get down," she hisses.

Hook doesn't need telling—he ducks, pressing his back against the gnarled bark beside me.

Sophia puts her hand up, I think to silence us—or me. "Stay quiet."

We hunker down, the heavy, damp air clinging to our skin. My breathing slows as I try to steady myself, but it's hard. My chest tightens with every second. I glance at Hook, and of course, he's looking at me. He catches my eye and gives me a look—a quiet warning, or maybe a reminder to stay calm. His lips are pressed into a firm line, and somehow, the way he stares makes me want to shove him. He doesn't have to say anything; he can be infuriatingly smug with just a glance.

My heart thunders so loudly in my chest that it echoes in my ears.

Sophia shifts beside us, her eyes scanning the fog, her focus absolute. Then I hear them—heavy boots crushing leaves underfoot, the rhythmic clink of armour, and muffled voices.

The fog thickens around us, as though it knows what's coming and is trying to shield us. Even the shadows seem to grow darker. And then, like

something out of a bad dream, the Queen's guards emerge from the mist—a long, unbroken line of them. Faceless under their helmets, their weapons gleam in the dim light.

They move with purpose, and I press myself down even more, willing the world to swallow me whole, to hide me—*us*.

The vibrations of their marching make the ground bounce beneath us. The steady rhythm of their steps is so close I barely dare to breathe. I watch their feet moving past, my body tense and trembling. I clamp my hand over my mouth, certain it's the only way to stop myself from making a sound and giving us away.

The guards turn their heads at the exact same moment, as if they're all connected. They move in perfect unison, their helmets tilting to look in our direction.

I lower my head, squeezing my eyes shut for a moment, and whisper, "Please don't see us." The words are so quiet, barely escaping my lips, but the weight of them is crushing my chest.

When I lift my head again, Sophia is staring at me, one brow raised. Hook is too. I have no idea what their problem is. I look past them, back at the guards.

Why the hell aren't they seeing us?

It feels like they're staring *right* at us. We're hardly hidden. The fog is thin, the trees sparse. We're exposed, out in the open. Are they blind?

I swear, one of them meets my gaze, and it takes everything I have not to close my eyes like some child playing hide-and-seek.

Then I notice it.

There's something in front of us, something invisible but tangible. It's as if I could reach out and touch it—time itself, maybe the very air around us. I open my mouth, not to speak but to breathe it in, to *feel* it. The air is thick with something unseen, something alive, and it pulls at me.

My hand moves on its own, stretching forward to grasp it, the overwhelming need to connect driving me. It's like the air is a blanket draped over us, shielding us, and I want to touch it, to make sure it's real.

Hook grabs my hand and pulls it down sharply.

He doesn't let go. Instead, he laces his fingers through mine and pulls me closer, pressing me firmly to his side. The heat of him seeps into me, raw and all-consuming. My chest tightens, something blooming inside me—thick and unrelenting.

I glance up at him, and I really wish I hadn't.

The moment I do, the gasp I've been holding in escapes me, louder than I intend.

"Hook," I whisper, barely audible, but he shimmers, his form flickering like the people we saw at the inn.

Sophia grabs my other hand before I can react, lacing her fingers through mine. She reaches for Hook's other hand, and now the three of us are linked, forming a circle.

What are they doing?

They both shimmer now, fading like ghosts. I can see the trees and ground behind them, as if someone's taken their picture and turned the transparency up. The air around us thickens further, pulling tight like an invisible cocoon.

"What's happening?" I whisper, my voice shaking, but no one answers.

I clutch their hands tighter, unsure if I'm grounding them—or myself.

I look down at myself—down at my legs, my thighs, my feet. My breath catches in my throat, and Hook's hand tightens around mine.

"It's alright," he says, leaning in so close his mouth is at my ear, his breath brushing the side of my face.

I want to let go of him, of Sophia. I want...

"I don't understand."

"Magic," Sophia whispers. "Keep still, and they won't see us."

I freeze, trying not to move as the heavy, rhythmic stomps of the guards thunder past us—their boots crunching leaves, their armour clinking like a relentless beat in the stillness. The air feels suffocating, thick with tension.

Sophia casts a glance over her shoulder, her focus shifting to the marching guards. The colour drains from her face, leaving her paler than I thought possible. Against the red of her hair, she looks almost ghostly.

She slips her fingers from mine and from Hook's, quickly putting our hands together instead, so we don't break apart.

"What are you doing?" I ask, a hint of panic creeping into my voice.

She places her hand over ours, firm but trembling. "I have to go. I can't stay here. You two have to do this."

"What? Why?"

She looks past us, to the path and shakes her head. Her breathing is harsher. She bites on her bottom lip. "I just have to. You know what to do."

“Where are we supposed to go?” The words come out strained, bitter, and I hate how I sound—helpless and unsure.

It’s not just Sophia. It’s the way she looks at me, the way her tone feels laced with disapproval. Around her, I feel raw, small, like I’ve gone back in time to standing in my mother’s shadow. And yet, I don’t want her to leave. Maybe I’d feel the same if it were my mother standing here now. They bring out the same thing in me—a weakness I’d rather not see.

Hook gives my hand another squeeze and damn him if he doesn’t know exactly what I’m thinking.

I can do this. I’ve done this before. I survived Wonderland as a child. But I was naïve then, unaware of what this place truly was.

“Sophia?” is all I manage to say.

“Pretty soon, the Queen will notice I’m missing. I’m not supposed to be here. Do you not get that? Don’t you understand?” Her words tumble out in a rush, a rising panic threading through them. But I don’t think she’s talking about me understanding why she can’t stay.

“We risked everything to get you into Wonderland. You know that, right? Marcellus, Peregrine, all of us. Even Thorin and me—we risked everything to have you here, to get you out of that hole, to have you here now, and I...” Her voice trails off, and something sharp flickers across her face—anger, frustration, guilt.

It prickles against my skin, raw and electric, and I feel it settle between us like a barrier.

She catches herself, taking a shaky breath, but the emotion is still there. “You’re all Wonderland has,” she says, her voice quieter now. “You must do what’s needed before this place falls like all the others. The Queen will drain it dry, and everything in it... we’ll all die.”

Her gaze flicks back to the guards. Their line has thinned now, the spaces between them growing longer, the rhythm of their march less steady.

“When the last of the guards are gone, count to one hundred and come out,” she says. She looks at Hook, meeting his eyes with a steady, deliberate gaze. “You know where to go.”

“Sophia. I ...” I say, but she shakes her head, her focus flicking between the two of us before landing back on Hook.

There’s something in that look—something unspoken, something meant only for him.

“What is that look?” I ask, my voice sharper than I intended. “What are you two saying that you’re not telling me?”

Sophia turns to me, and for the first time, I see sadness in her eyes—a sadness that twists my stomach into knots. She reaches out, resting her hand gently on my arm.

“He believes in you, you know that? We all do. But until you start believing in yourself, she is always going to win.”

I don’t even know what she means, and I don’t get the chance to ask. She lets go and steps back, her figure fading into the mist like it’s swallowing her whole.

I can’t move. Not with the guards still so close, even if their line is almost gone. Not with Hook holding my hands, grounding me, keeping me right where I am.

Hook watches Sophia leave, his eyes narrowed, his expression unreadable. It’s only when the last guard passes that he lets go of my hand. Without a word, he pulls the map out of his jacket, his jaw set as he looks down at the glowing lines. They shimmer now, bright and alive, and I swear it’s not even the same map we had before. Things have shifted, moved. The maze has fallen off the edge of the parchment entirely.

“Hook...” I start.

He shakes his head. “Not now.”

His eyes remain fixed on the map, tracing the lines with his fingers like he’s searching for something only he can see. He stands, leaving me crouched in the dirt, watching him. Whatever shimmer had surrounded him before is gone now—he’s solid again.

A strange heat rises in me, prickling under my skin, and my fists clench at my sides. I don’t know where it’s coming from, but I hate it. I take a slow breath, but Sophia’s words spin in my head, poking and prodding at me, pushing me to lash out.

“We need to go the same direction as the guards,” Hook says, not even glancing up. “Follow the road, then head towards what looks like a field.” He steps onto the path, leaving me among the trees as he pulls the map over his face again. He tilts his head like he’s looking right at me, but the map blocks his actual face.

“Can you even see anything with that?” I climb out from the cover of the trees, glancing around. The last guard is nowhere in sight, and if it wasn’t for the way they’ve churned up the path, it’d be like they were

never here at all. The air is still, silent, and the sun has started to rise, casting the world in a soft, pale glow. I take a breath and try not to think so hard about everything. “What is it showing you? Does it show you the way?”

Hook doesn’t answer. He just turns, faces the path ahead, and then turns to face me again.

“Do you know where we’re going?”

Still nothing.

“Are you even *listening* to me?”

He starts walking ahead, not a glance, not a word. Nothing remotely gentlemanly. Part of me wants to stop right where I am or turn and walk the other way. But I don’t know which way that is. If I did, I probably would.

I think some part of me is wired that way—rebellious. Like when I moved to Edinburgh, as far from my mother as possible, determined to be my own person. Maybe that’s why I liked Wonderland the first time. I made my own decisions, decided where to go and what to do.

Hook adjusts the map over his face again, angling it just so, and I have to bite back the urge to snatch it from him.

“Are you just going to ignore me and walk off?”

He stops abruptly, turns, and lowers the map. “What are you bellyaching about?”

“I’m not bellyaching,” I snap. “I was trying to *ask* you something, and you walked off.”

He waves the map at me, his expression unimpressed. “And I’m trying to get us where we need to go before the Queen’s guards circle back and catch us. Unless you’d prefer that.”

“No, but you could at least *tell* me where we’re going.”

“I could,” he says, lifting the map back to his face.

“Gahhh...” I storm over to him, yanking the map down. He snatches it back like I might rip it in half.

“Careful, princess. You might tear it.”

“I’ll do more than tear it. Let me look. Where are we going?”

I make another grab for the map, but he holds it out of reach and, oh no, starts walking again. My feet betray me, falling into step behind him, even as I fight with myself. This is ridiculous.

“Can you actually *see* anything with that over your face?” I snap, throwing up my hands. “And why do you keep looking at me with it? Aren’t you supposed to be watching where we’re going?”

He lowers the map just enough to smirk at me, and it’s infuriating. “When I lift it like this, I can see everything,” he says, the grin curling his lips. “Through things.”

My brow furrows. “Through things?”

“Like clothes,” he adds, and his smirk deepens.

I stop dead, staring at him. “You’re a *pig*. Do you know that?”

He shrugs, entirely too pleased with himself. Heat rushes to my face, and my chest tightens with something I don’t want to name.

“Give me the goddamn map,” I say through clenched teeth. This time, when I grab for it, he lets me take it, his grin still annoyingly intact.

I hold the map up to my face, glaring at him through it. But when I do, my heart leaps into my throat.

“Oh, God.”

Chapter Fifty-Two

ALICE

THE MAP TREMBLES in my hands, the ink shifting under my touch like the damn thing is alive. I can feel the heat of Hook's gaze, burning into me even through the parchment. What the hell am I seeing?

I pull the map from my face, my heart hammering against my ribs. The cool air hits my flushed skin, but I can't shake the image burned into my mind—*him*. Those eyes, raw and unguarded. He's always this untouchable, arrogant, unbreakable pirate, but what I just saw... It's like some crack in the dam, a glimpse into a world of pain that steals my breath.

I stare at him. He's standing across from me, his arms crossed, his usual guarded expression back in place. But there's something different now—something softer in his eyes. Just the faintest flicker of vulnerability. A glimpse of a man I don't know but feel like I could reach out and touch.

I open my mouth to say something—anything—but the words stick in my throat. How do I even begin to ask? *Why?* Why would he let me see that?

I lift the map again. I have to. And there it is—him, but not him. The magic in the map doesn't just show us the path, the twisted roads of Wonderland leading us to the Queen's heart. Oh no. It pulses with him, pulling me in.

It's like seeing him through a different lens, one stripped bare of all his usual armour. The way his muscles tense as he holds back. The sharp line

of his jaw. The hardness of his expression, built to keep the world out—everything, except the secrets he guards so viciously.

And then I see it.

The pain. The way his heart pounds, frayed and battered, pieces of it lost so long ago that I don't think he even knows where to look for them. The desire, raw and desperate, hiding behind that mask of bravado he wears like a second skin. It's overwhelming, electric, and it spikes something deep inside me that I don't know how to name.

And his eyes—those stormy, dark eyes. Full of unsaid words and things I don't dare ask.

I can't breathe. I can't move.

The map lowers in my hands, but my gaze doesn't leave him. I'm staring at him, wide-eyed, and he's staring right back.

There's something about the way his lips press together, the faint light in his eyes softening for a second, and I'm undone. My chest tightens, my mind spins, and deep in the pit of my stomach, something stirs—a pull, a crack, a spark.

None of it is tangible, but I *feel* it all.

He takes a step closer, his voice low and deliberate. "See everything you wanted to see?"

I swallow hard, trying to find some semblance of control, but my body betrays me. Heat crawls up my neck, my pulse thrumming in every corner of me.

"I saw you," I say, my voice barely steady, the words trembling on the edge of truth. My chest aches, my breathing shallow, because *it's him*. I don't even know what that means, but...

Hook doesn't take the map from me. Instead, he moves closer. So close I can feel the heat of him, can smell the salt and leather that clings to him. And I... It doesn't matter. My thoughts are a mess, my brain isn't working, not with him this close. Damn him. Damn me. And damn this map.

"Well?" His voice is rough now, cutting through my haze. "Are we going, or do you want to wait for the guards to come back?"

Chapter Fifty-Three

HOOK

ALICE IS WALKING BEHIND ME, lifting the damn map again and again. I have to keep myself together, keep my hands by my sides, so I don't march over there and take it from her. Of course, when she looks through it, she's seeing Wonderland's so-called glory—its magic, its decay, the whole show. But I also know that when she looks at me, she's seeing something else entirely.

And I can't explain it.

I know what it's like to look at someone through that map, to have that magic strip away all the masks and shields. When I looked through it, I saw her—Alice. I saw her power, her vulnerability, her magic. It doesn't even make sense. You can't see those things. They're not real, not tangible. But I saw them.

I saw *her*.

It wasn't just the fire that burns inside her or the way she fights back. It was the cracks she hides from everyone, the broken parts she refuses to acknowledge, the pieces she's lost. And her heart—damn it. Her heart beats in a way that makes mine stutter. It's raw and untamed, just like her, and it pulls at something in me I'd buried a long time ago. Something I'd silenced.

I press my lips together and keep walking. I have no business thinking like this.

I glance back at her, just for a second. Her focus is on the map, her expression calm, but when she looks at me, when our eyes meet... there's something there. I have to look away because if I saw all that in her, what does she see in me?

Part of me wants to ask her. Part of me wants to know. But the rest of me—the part that knows better—keeps walking.

Then I stop.

She stops too, and I clench my fists at my sides. Maybe this isn't such a good idea. Maybe I should let her go, let her do her own thing. The mirror's words chime in my head, telling me she's the key, but I'm Captain Hook. I do things alone. I don't need anyone. I don't need *her*.

Alice lowers the map and tilts her head. "What are you doing? You look constipated."

"I'm fine," I snap, stepping back, but she doesn't notice. She's already looking at the map again.

"I'm not sure what's real on this thing and what isn't," she murmurs, her eyes scanning the parchment. "Is this what Wonderland really looks like, or is the map just showing me some illusion?" She presses it to her face again, turning slowly, taking in the woods around us. "Everything is beautiful and rotting at the same time." She lowers the map. "You saw it, didn't you? The way it looks?"

I nod. "You see it for what it really is."

She holds the map out in front of her, turning it over as if the answers might be scrawled on the back. "Even the map changes," she says, running her hand over the parchment. "It's like a sat nav, only slower. Every time we get somewhere new, it updates. What was at the bottom disappears."

I frown at her. "What the hell is a sat nav?" I do my best to repeat the words exactly as she said them, but they sound absurd coming out of my mouth.

Her brows pinch together, and she looks at me, half amused, half disbelieving. "Satellite navigation," she says, in that condescending tone people use when explaining things to small children.

I stare at her blankly. That tone doesn't get used on me. But I also have no idea what the hell she's talking about. "You mean like a compass?"

"No," she says, dragging the word out like I'm an idiot. "I mean like a..." She pauses, her lips twitching. "Oh."

"What?"

Her eyes light up, and there's a twitch at the corners of her mouth that makes my chest tighten. "You don't know what a sat nav is," she says, her voice full of laughter.

I scowl, crossing my arms over my chest, but that's not enough. I snatch the map from her hands before she can dissolve into a full-blown fit of giggles. "Give me that. It's clearly making you even more impossible."

She gasps, grabbing at empty air as I step back. "I was *using* that," she protests.

"And now I'm using it," I say, folding it neatly and shoving it into my pocket. "You've had your fun. Now, maybe we can walk and get my amulet?"

Her mouth opens and closes a few times, no doubt preparing some biting remark, but she stops, shaking her head. Narrowing her eyes, she plants her hands on her hips, glaring at me like she could set me on fire.

"Do you always have to be such a—"

"Lovable and charming rogue?" I cut her off with a smirk. "Yes, love. That's part of the job description." I turn away and start down the path, the way I know we need to go. When I looked through the map, the path lit up—not with arrows or bright lights, but as if the place itself breathed, and this was where it got the most air.

Alice stays where I left her, and it takes everything in me not to look back, not to tell her to keep up. I know she'll follow. She always does.

And there it is.

I allow myself one glance over my shoulder, enough to catch her eyes before she moves.

It doesn't take her long to catch up, but we don't speak. We just walk. One foot in front of the other. It's all we seem to do in this place.

Maybe that's Wonderland's big trick—make everyone walk until they're entirely sick of it, until they lose their minds and get lost.

The forest hums around us, alive with a strange, pulsing magic that vibrates at the edges of my senses. I focus on that, on saving Neverland, on not paying attention to the way Alice walks beside me. On not paying attention to the way it feels to have her there.

I take a deep breath and shove the thought away. Focus, Hook. You've got a job to do.

Maybe it's because I've spent too long in Neverland's decaying magic that Alice's magic feels so... alive. It's vibrant, raw, pulling at something

deep inside me—a part of me that’s gone dark. Or maybe it’s Wonderland itself.

Even as it wilts under the Queen’s greedy hands, there’s still magic here. Faint, clinging to the world like it’s fighting to survive. But magic always wants something, doesn’t it? And this magic, with all its fragile beauty, feels like it’s holding on to *us*.

The road shifts as we walk, like it can’t decide what it wants to be. First, it’s mud, beaten down and ridged from the boots of the guards. Then, without warning, it shifts to stone—reds and blues at first, eventually fading to a dull yellow.

The yellow bricks beneath my boots are cracked and worn, and the sight of them stirs something in me.

Alice must feel it too because she slows. “Are we still in Wonderland, or did we somehow step into Oz?” she says. “All we need now is a tin man and a lion with no courage.”

“It’s a story, then?” I say, but my mind is elsewhere. There’s a flicker of memory in the back of my head, something shouting at me to remember. The story—the yellow road, the witch, and the wizard behind the curtain. I remember watching it, or reading it, with my mother before everything went to hell. Before Neverland.

The witch had scared the living daylights out of me—not because of her magic, but because of her laugh. That sharp, shrieking cackle haunted me for days, echoing every time I closed my eyes.

Alice arches a brow at me. “What? No clever remark? Not even a ‘don’t be so ridiculous, love’?” She pitches her voice in an exaggerated version of mine.

I smirk. “I thought I’d enjoy a bit of quiet while we walked. Seems you talk enough for both of us.”

Her jaw drops, her mouth falling open as she blinks at me in mock outrage. “You have *something* you want to say?” There’s a pause, a silent exchange between us before she speaks again. “I’m being punished for something, aren’t I?” she says. “That’s what this is. I’m being punished for some past-life sin I don’t even know about.”

I spread my arms wide. “No, love. Spending time with me, you’re being *rewarded*.”

I spin on my heel and keep walking, and behind me, I hear her mutter, “I hate him.”

It makes me smile.

But the air begins to change. It's heavier now, and with it comes a scent that sets my nerves on edge. Flowers—cloying and sweet—mixed with something metallic. It clings to the back of my throat with every breath. Sharp and wrong, like blood left too long in the sun.

"What now?" Alice asks, and we both slow to a near stop.

"I haven't got a damn clue," I say, my voice low.

"There." She points ahead. "What is that?"

A mist rises like a wall before us, shimmering faintly in the fading light. It rolls lazily across the field, tendrils curling and twisting as if it's alive. The air shifts again, colder now, sharper, and my gut tightens. Every instinct in me screams to turn back.

Alice steps forward, but I grab her arm, pulling her back. "Wait."

She looks at me, brow furrowed. "What is it?"

"I don't know, but..." My eyes are locked on the mist, watching the way it swirls, almost playfully. But I'm sure there's nothing playful about it.

It's not just the fog. At the end of the path stands a black iron fence, thick and imposing, surrounding the field. And the field itself... It's filled with deep red flowers, their bright, velvety petals swaying gently as if in some unseen breeze.

I step forward, leaving Alice on the path, and move to the turnstile at a break in the fence. The scent grows thicker, sharper, clawing at my senses. It coils in my veins like poison, dulling my mind, making my head swim.

For a moment, the world tilts, and I grip the metal frame to steady myself. "Not this way," I say, my voice rough. "We can't go this way."

The yellow path snakes between the flowers, the fading bricks just visible between the stems. The field is vast, sprawling far into the mist.

Alice's footsteps crunch beside me, and I feel her presence before I see her. "We have to go that way. It's the only path there is. The other option is to go back. What does the map say?"

I pull the map from my pocket and lift it to my face, expecting the mist to fall away, for the magic to make everything clear. But if anything, it makes the mist thicker—shimmering now, filled with glittering flecks that feel hauntingly inviting.

Alice is right. There's no other path. I turn, looking for every possible way out, but all I see through the map is that same black fence stretching

endlessly. The path before us is vibrant, glowing faintly beneath the flowers.

I lower the map. "I can't see another way."

Alice steps closer, and my instincts flare. I want to pull her back, but I don't.

"It's only flowers, right? We just walk through them," she says, squinting ahead. "There's something on the other side. Is that...?" She shields her eyes with her hand as if that might help. "There's something there, isn't there? Like gates. Can I see the map?"

I hand it to her, and she gasps as soon as she lifts it. "There. Did you see that? At the other side."

She moves closer to the fence for a better look, but I grab her, holding her back.

"Look at it," she insists, offering the map to me again. "Right at the other side. It looks like there's some kind of gate. Lantern gates."

I take the map and look. She's right—a tall gate, and beyond it, a winding path. But that's not the problem.

I lower the map and step to the fence, brushing my fingers against the petals of one of the flowers. They're soft, almost damp to the touch.

"In Neverland, we call these Dreamthorns," I say, pulling my hand back. I pluck a flower from the field, its crimson glow faintly pulsing like it has a heartbeat of its own. Holding it up, I turn it in my hand, feeling the weight of it, the wrongness of it. "They give off a scent—a mist. That's what this is. You breathe it in as you walk through."

Alice frowns, her brows knitting together. "And what happens if you breathe it in?"

"It sends you to sleep."

Her frown deepens. "What kind of sleep?"

I toss the flower back into the field, watching it sink among the others like it was never there. "A long one."

I reach for her arm, gripping it firmly, and start pulling her back towards the path. "We can't breathe this shit in. It'll have us out cold in minutes, and there's nothing to wake us up."

"I don't understand." She resists slightly. "We go to sleep. That's all?"

"We go to sleep and *stay* asleep," I say. "That's the problem. You breathe this in, you're dreaming, and then you *don't wake up*. You're

trapped in whatever dream the mist gives you while your body starves, withers, and dies. And there's no one here to pull us out."

"Oh." She stares at the field, her lips parted. The flowers seem to sway mockingly in the breeze, the mist curling lazily above them. "If this is the only way to go, then... which way did the guards go? Did we take a wrong turn somewhere? I didn't see another path. I mean... we just followed the one they did, right?"

I can see her mind racing, trying to piece it all together. "They must have come through here too. They must've walked through the mist, but..." She glances back at the flowers. "None of these look like an entire army trampled through them."

"They didn't." My voice tightens with frustration. "Gods."

This is Wonderland. Or worse—this is *the Queen*. The Queen and all her bloody madness. Every time I think this place can't throw anything worse at us, it proves me wrong.

"And we can't even go back," I say, waving the map at her like it's personally to blame. "This thing says this is the way."

She bites her lip, her gaze darting to the mist and then back to me. "We could hold our breath," she suggests cautiously. "Take a deep breath before we enter and just run for it. The other side isn't that far—I can see the fence. We could make it."

"You can't even take the smallest breath of this stuff. If the mist gets into your lungs, you're done. We're done."

She doesn't flinch, her eyes locked on mine. There's a steeliness in her gaze, a stubborn resolve that both infuriates and unnerves me. "Then that's what we do, right? There's no other way."

"No." I take a slow, measured breath. "There isn't."

"If the map's right, and whatever we need is on the other side, then we don't have a choice."

Of course, Wonderland wouldn't just let us stroll through. That would be too easy. But what if this is just another trap? Another twist in its twisted game?

My throat tightens, my mind racing, the possibilities tearing at me. I exhale hard, forcing it all down. "Fine. We'll try it. But I mean it—not even a small breath. Nothing. We go in, and if you trip or slow down—"

"Then you'll be a gentleman and drag me out, won't you? Oh wait, no, that's not you. You'll leg it and leave me there gasping for air. I get it."

My jaw clenches. “You think you know me so well.”

I step closer, closing the space between us until she has to tilt her head to meet my eyes. My voice drops low, sharp as a blade. “Let’s do this, shall we? We get to the turnstile, take a breath—”

“And run like our lives depend on it,” she finishes, her voice matching my intensity.

“Because they do.”

Chapter Fifty-Four

HOOK

WE'RE RUNNING.

The mist closes in the second we cross the threshold, curling and writhing like it's alive. It reaches for us, claws at us, hungry for a taste. My lungs scream—not from exertion, but from the raw agony of holding my breath. Every instinct howls at me to breathe, but I grit my teeth, keep my mouth shut, and push harder. My boots hammer against the broken brick path beneath me, the uneven ground fighting me with every step.

Alice is just ahead, her hair flying loose like a wild flame. She doesn't look back—good. I don't want her to. She hasn't hesitated, not once, and I'll admit, I'm impressed. She runs fast, faster than I'd have given her credit for, her skirt bunched in her fists to keep it out of her way. She's determined, relentless, and it stirs something dark and dangerous in me.

The mist thickens, swirling like smoke, blurring the edges of everything around us. My eyes sting, sharp and searing, but I don't dare stop. The path beneath me shifts—solid one moment, soft as sand the next. It's like the bloody ground is alive, like it's toying with us, waiting for one wrong step to swallow us whole. If we go down, we're dead. No one's coming to save us.

I'm surprised there aren't bodies here. No bones. No scraps of cloth. Nothing to mark the unlucky bastards who came before us. Maybe the earth did swallow them. Maybe it'll swallow us too.

I keep my focus on Alice.

She's the only thing here that doesn't change. She glances over her shoulder, just for a second, her wide eyes locking with mine. I nod sharply. *Keep going. Don't stop. Don't look back. Don't worry about me.*

We run. We run so fucking hard that my chest feels like it's caving in.

The ache to breathe is unbearable. My throat burns, my lungs clawing for air. Every instinct in me begs for just one gulp—*just one*, it whispers. *Pull your shirt over your face. Take a shallow breath. It'll be fine.*

But it won't.

These flowers, this mist—it's death. Lies and legends brought to life. The deadliest thing in Neverland. One breath is all it takes, and you're theirs. You'll lie beneath their petals, their poison wrapping around you like a lover's embrace. It gives you everything—everything you've ever wanted, everything you've ever dreamed. It feeds it to you, makes you believe it's real, and by the time you realise you've been trapped, it's too late. You're nothing but a hollowed-out shell, rotting under their cursed beauty.

I hope Alice understands that. I hope she knows what we're running from.

I clench my fists, forcing my legs to move faster, forcing my mind to focus.

But then I hear it.

"James."

I clamp my hand over my mouth. If I didn't need to see, I'd close my eyes. If I didn't need to keep running, I'd stop.

The voice—the sound, that voice I know—cuts right into me. It buries itself under my skin, twisting deep.

No.

"James. Wait. Wait for me."

No, no, no.

"You're not real," I think, the words hammering against the inside of my skull. *You're not real.*

"James. Don't leave me."

"Sam," I whisper, the name spilling out before I can stop it. My lips part, the mist brushing against them, ready to slide into my lungs, ready to claim me. The tang of it lingers on my tongue.

Fuck you. Fuck ... you.

Alice snaps her head around at the sound of my voice, her eyes wide with shock. But I don't care. My feet slow, moving as if by their own will, and I turn my head.

Mistake.

But he's there.

"Sam," I say again, louder this time.

A boy stands in the mist, his small frame barely visible through the haze. His dark eyes are solemn, unblinking, fixed on me.

My hand flies back to my mouth, pressing hard to keep myself from breathing. My mind feels fractured, split between what I know and what I see.

I can't breathe. I *know* I can't. One inhalation, and it's over.

But I can't look away either. I can't force myself to move because my brain doesn't understand. It's him. It's Sam. *Sam, the reason I ended up in Neverland. Sam—the reason for everything.*

And I left him.

Alice grabs my arm, yanking me hard. I shove her off without thinking.

"Hook," she snaps, her voice sharp and thick with panic.

That tone—her *voice*—snaps me back. My attention jerks to her. She's shaking her head, her eyes wide, furious, and terrified all at once. But they're red now, the edges stained crimson. Lines streak across her face like veins.

The mist.

It's seeping in. Not just through our lungs—it's getting us through our skin. We don't even need to breathe it in.

I glance back at Sam.

He's not real. He's not real. He's... not... real.

Please.

The pounding in my head is unbearable, the thoughts splintering, refusing to hold shape.

Another glance at the mist, at the boy standing in it. He's still there. His dark eyes pierce through the haze, sharp and unrelenting, like they're answering me—pulling me in. And it's working.

I can't look away. I don't know how to turn away, how to run. How do I leave him behind again? I left him once, and it broke me.

"Sam," I shout, the name tearing from my throat like it's been clawing its way out for years.

The whispers in my mind—the ones that tell me to run—are faint, drowned out by the sight of him. He doesn't move, but I swear I see him blink. His small hand twitches, like he's reaching for me.

"Come on," Alice shouts, yanking my arm with all her strength. I think she punches me—maybe in the side, maybe in the arm—I barely feel it. I hear her though, loud and furious. "Get the fuck on, Hook."

She pulls harder, dragging at me, her voice desperate and cracking.

My legs refuse to move, locked in place, my chest tight. *If he's still here, he's real. He has to be.*

Alice tugs again, harder this time, and my body finally responds. I stagger back as she drags me towards the gate. My lungs burn, screaming for air, and my steps feel heavier with each stride.

Even as we near the gate, even as the mist begins to thin, I glance back. Sam is still there.

And he's still watching.

"It's real. It has to be."

When we reach the end—the other side—the gate looms before us. Alice grabs the iron bars, rattling them hard, her desperation echoing in the silence. But they won't budge.

She gathers her skirt in her hands, bunching the fabric at her thighs as she climbs over. No hesitation. No second thoughts. I move to follow, swinging myself over the top and landing hard on the other side.

"James. Don't leave me."

The voice comes again.

I shake my head, my stomach twisting.

I turn back the moment my feet hit the ground.

And he's still there.

Standing in the field.

Watching me.

A gasp tears from my throat before I can stop it—raw, desperate, sharp enough to hurt. My chest heaves, my hands clutching at it, the burning need for air clawing at my mind. My gaze locks on him, unmoving, as the red mist above the field swirls and shifts, parting around him like he commands it.

It's not real. It's not real. He's not real.

But I can't look away.

Another gasp breaks free, long and ragged, scraping against my throat.

“Hook, what’s wrong? What is it?” Alice’s voice is distant. I hear her, but I can’t process her words. She’s behind me—somewhere behind me—her breaths sharp and panicked. I can feel her urgency like a pulse against my skin, but my mind is pulled somewhere else.

To him.

To Sam.

He’s walking towards me now, wide-eyed, looking just like I remember.

No, not *exactly*. Not the way he looked *then*. Not the version of him that haunts my nightmares. Not the glassy eyes, the blue lips, or the bruising that marred his face.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

The words tumble out before I can stop them, choking on their way out, my chest heaving with the weight of them. My knees buckle, and I want to drop to the ground, to beg for forgiveness.

I’ve dreamt of this moment—imagined it a thousand times. What I would say. How I would feel. This was the reason I came to Neverland, the purpose that has driven me for so long. And now the words are spilling out of me, words I’ve held for years, spilling too fast, too raw.

Alice grabs my arm, her hands frantic and desperate, trying to pull me away.

I shove her off without thinking.

“Hook.” Her voice cuts through the fog, sharp and furious.

She shakes me, her panic vibrating through me, but I can barely register her. She’s on the edge of my vision, nothing but a blur. My focus is locked on Sam.

“Why did you leave?” Sam’s voice is quiet, but his words hit their mark. “Why, James? Why did you go?”

My head shakes, my body trembling as I fall to my knees. “I didn’t leave you. I went to get help. I…” My voice cracks, my throat tightening.

My hands claw at the ground as I crawl forward, reaching out before I can stop myself. My lungs burn, my brain screaming at me to stop, to pull back. But all I see is him. All I hear is his voice.

“You promised to always look after me. Why didn’t you save me, James? Why did you run?”

I flinch.

And this is real—it *has* to be. Because the mist gives us dreams, doesn't it? It gives us what we want. If this were the mist, I'd be lying in that field with Sam, basking in his forgiveness. I'd have what my heart craves. Not this. Not the truth of what I did.

I choke out another, "I'm sorry." It's pathetic. Empty. Just words. Just *fucking* words. But they're all I have.

Alice's hand slams against my chest, stopping me dead. She's in front of me now, blocking my view.

"Snap out of it, Hook." she shouts, her voice raw and desperate. "Whatever it is, it isn't real. Wake the fuck up."

"You left me to die."

The words claw at my mind, digging in deep, tearing me apart.

He's not real. He's not real. He's not—

But the mist thickens around me, chilling what little air I have left. My chest feels like it's collapsing. My body feels weightless, untethered. Like I'm falling.

"Hook."

Alice.

I try to hold onto it—to hold onto *her*—but Sam's face looms in my mind, his pain consuming everything.

The mist pulls me deeper.

And then, there's nothing.

Not Sam. Not Alice.

Just silence.

Chapter Fifty-Five

ALICE

"HOOK."

I shake his shoulders, gripping him tightly, but he doesn't respond. His eyes are clamped shut, his face pale and twisted with anguish. His lips part, muttering something low and broken. That's all he's done since we got here.

I managed to drag him away from the gate, but it's like the mist has followed us. Tendrils of red smoke cling to him, clawing at his skin. I've tried everything—waving it away, wrapping my arms around him to shield him—but it's like the mist won't let go. It's tethered to him, feeding on him.

"Sam," he whispers, the name spilling from his lips over and over, raw and desperate.

Every time he says it, something cracks inside me. The sound of it chills me, runs through me like a dagger. I don't know who Sam is, but whoever they are, they're carved into him like a wound that never healed.

"Sam, I'm sorry."

Shit.

My stomach twists. He's trapped, lost in whatever the mist is giving him. But it doesn't make sense. I thought the mist gave you what you wanted—your dreams come true. Whatever this is, it's something else entirely.

He's rolling on the ground, his face contorted in pain, his breathing shallow. The mist clings to him like a living thing, swirling around him, feeding on him.

"Come on, you stubborn bastard. Wake up."

Nothing.

He's limp, a dead weight, and panic surges in my chest, threatening to take over. I shove it down. Think, Alice. Think.

I hook my hands under his arms and start dragging him backwards, further away from the gate. He's bloody heavy, his body pulling against me like he's anchored to the mist. It clings to us both, greedy tendrils wrapping around him, trying to reach for me.

"Come on, fucking move."

I swipe at his face, trying to clear the mist, but it clings stubbornly to his skin, his nostrils. I press my hand over his nose and mouth, but he just pulls away, muttering again.

There's got to be something I can do.

I drag him further, away from the thickest of the mist. It doesn't touch me the way it touches him—I can't smell it anymore, and the sickly-sweet scent of copper is fading. But it's still wrapped around him, consuming him.

I sit back on my knees, my heart pounding, my mind racing. Poison. Hook said this mist was poison. And poisons always have antidotes, don't they? Back home, nettles always grow near dock leaves. Maybe Wonderland works the same way.

It's a long shot, but it's all I've got.

My gaze darts around the forest floor, scanning for something—anything. The edges of the field are hazy, the mist draping down like silk.

I scramble towards the nearest cluster of plants, keeping one eye on Hook, the other on the foliage poking up through the cracked earth. Leaves, stems, flowers—none of them look familiar. One of them has to help.

"Don't go anywhere," I mutter, sparing him a glance. He's still whispering, his voice hoarse, his body trembling. My chest tightens at the sound.

I push to my feet and dart away, each step heavier as the mist clings to my skin. My heart pounds as I sift through the plants at the edge of the

fence. If I crouch low enough, I can just make out the ground beneath the haze.

Then I see it.

A cluster of crimson flowers with long, curling petals and faintly glowing ferns. Thin black stems pulse with energy, almost alive. They stand out against the muted forest floor like they don't belong.

"This has to be it," I murmur, reaching for one.

The stem is warm beneath my fingers, the petals giving off a cloyingly sweet scent, like overripe fruit.

Please. Work. Please.

I sprint back to Hook, dropping to my knees beside him. He's still muttering, his voice cracking as he calls for Sam, apologising over and over. The raw pain in his words cuts deep, and I don't even know what he's begging forgiveness for. I just hope—hope—that whoever Sam is forgives him, because he's clearly carrying the weight of the world.

I tear one of the petals from the flower and crush it between my fingers. A bright, glowing liquid oozes out.

"Okay," I whisper softly. "I'm here. I've got you."

I hold the crushed petals under his nose, the liquid shimmering in the dim light. His body jerks, his breath catches sharply, and for a moment, I think I've made it worse.

"Hook," I whisper, cupping his face with both hands. "Come on, breathe."

I crush more petals in my palm, smothering them against his nose and mouth. His chest rises sharply.

"Come on, you idiot," I hiss, leaning in close. My face is so near his, I can feel the warmth of his breath with every exhale.

His lips move faintly, whispering that name again. "Sam."

I shake him gently, desperation bleeding into my voice. "Breathe, you shit. Come on. Listen to me."

His eyes flicker open.

I freeze. For a moment, I'm not even sure he's seeing me. His gaze is unfocused, distant. But then he blinks.

"Hook," I say, my voice trembling.

He licks his cracked lips. "Alice," he rasps, barely above a whisper.

Relief floods through me, and I slump forward. My forehead rests against his, our breaths mingling in the still air.

For a moment, everything else fades. His eyes are on mine, clearer now, the pain in them raw and exposed. My pulse races as his gaze drops to my lips, the space between us narrowing.

I hesitate.

The air feels thick, charged. My breath catches in my throat, and my heart pounds against my ribs. I'm close enough to kiss him, to let this tension pull us together—but I stop.

He shifts slightly, his breath warm against my skin, his hand lifting to brush against my hair.

"Hook," I whisper, the sound barely audible, but it's enough to break the spell.

I pull back, just slightly, my face still close to his, but the moment is gone.

"I thought I'd lost you," I say, my voice cracking.

His fingers thread into my hair, his grip weak but steady.

"I thought..." My hands frame his face as I lean back to look at him. His skin is still pale, clammy, but his eyes are focused now. "I could bloody kill you, you know that?"

Chapter Fifty-Six

HOOK

I PUSH BACK from where I'm sitting, trying to put as much distance between me and the field as I can. Something in my head aches, a deep, crushing band around my temples. It's hard at first to figure out where I am.

Oh, I *know* where I am. I'm in Wonderland.

But to *feel* it, to actually *understand* it, is different.

I feel like I'm not actually part of myself, like I lost something back in that field. Like something *important* has been ripped away from me, and now I don't know how to connect to what's left.

I take a breath, drag a hand through my hair, and—*Alice*.

She's watching me, her blue eyes locked onto mine with an intensity that makes my skin itch.

"You good?" she asks.

I try to answer, actually try to force the words out, but nothing comes. I clear my throat and nod. "I'm fine."

I push myself up, but my arms feel weak, like they're made of something *soft*, and it takes me longer than it should. Then I'm on my feet, and the world tilts.

No. *That's me*.

Alice moves with me, her hand reaching out to grab my arm, steady me, but I shake my head.

"I'm fine."

Fine.

But I can't pull my attention away from the field.

I take a step toward it.

"Don't." Alice's voice is sharp, firm.

So I stop.

The usual noise in my head—the sarcasm, the sharp edges—is gone. I don't even have a reply for her, nothing quick, nothing smart. Instead, I say, "Did you see him?"

I don't know why I ask, because I *know* she didn't. But the words come out anyway.

Alice frowns at me. "See who?"

"Sam," I say, and the name cracks something in my throat, in my chest.

I don't know when Alice took my hand. Maybe it was to stop me from walking straight into the field. Maybe it was something else. But her fingers tighten around mine, like she's trying to hold me there, to *anchor* me. Like that small gesture can say something neither of us have words for.

"I didn't see anyone else," she says. "Just you. And the mist."

My jaw clenches.

I turn back to the field, waiting, listening.

As if I might see him.

As if I might *hear* him.

As if every accusation might spill from that cursed place and slam into me all over again.

And maybe I *deserve* that.

Because I *looked* for this. I searched for it. All those years, all that time spent. I even dragged myself into that godforsaken place full of pixie dust and whining lost kids. I looked for *him*.

I pull my hand free from Alice's, but I don't step toward the field.

What's the point?

He isn't there. He *wasn't* there.

The mist only gives you what your heart desires most.

How fucking cruel that it didn't spit out the *amulet* instead.

I square my shoulders, force in a breath. There's no time for this. No time for the sentimental bullshit my brain is trying to drag me into. Captain Hook does *not* get lost in self-pity.

No.

Captain Hook *moves*.

Captain Hook *does things*.

"Right," I say, as if saying it aloud might snap me out of whatever this is. "Figures."

I'm not really talking to Alice. I'm not talking to anyone.

Maybe just to the disconnected version of myself that's still stuck in that damn mist.

"Hook."

Her voice is quieter now, softer, laced with something close to concern.

I turn, meet her eyes, and there's a war in my head, a hundred different things pulling at me, and I don't know which one to grab onto.

"We need to go," I say. "We're wasting time."

"I..." She frowns at me. "Hook, this is—"

But before she can finish whatever *soft* thing she wants to say, a guttural snarl rips through the air.

We both freeze.

The sound is deep, vibrating through the ground beneath us.

Not like the heavy stomp of boots.

No. This is something else. Something *worse*.

It grows louder.

Does this place ever fucking stop?

I stop mid-step, my hand already at the hilt of my blade. *Why the hell didn't I bring my sword to this sodding place?*

I glance at Alice.

She looks at me.

Then we both turn to the woods.

"What the hell is that?" she whispers.

"A fan of yours, perhaps."

The mist stirs at my words.

It doesn't move toward us.

It curls into the forest, shifting, spreading like something unseen is pushing it aside.

And then—there it is.

Two glowing red eyes. Watching us from the dark.

Shit.

"Stay behind me," I say, stepping between it and Alice.

"Now."

Chapter Fifty-Seven

HOOK

THE GROWL DEEPENS, vibrating through the air and settling low in my chest like a warning bell. It's the kind of sound that makes my instincts take over before my brain even catches up. My hand's already pulling at my knife, but the blade feels useless. Too small. Too light. I need a sword.

"What is that?" Alice's voice is light, tight with tension. She's close—too close—but I don't push her back the way I want to. I need her behind me, out of the way. I can't afford to divide my attention. If I do, we're both as good as dead.

I scan the trees, searching for those glowing eyes, following the sound of the growling. Whatever it is, I hope it decides we're not worth the trouble and slinks back to whatever pit of hell it crawled out of.

Wishful thinking.

The growl comes again, dragging through the mist, and something shifts in the shadows ahead. For a second, I swear I see it—a hulking mass, thick and black. The mist clings to it as if it's part of the creature itself. And yes, it's a creature.

Alice's fingers brush my arm. I steal a glance back at her. She's peering past me, her eyes wide, fixed on the shadow. Her breathing is quick, but at least she's not panicking. Not yet. Good. She needs to hold it together.

We move in sync, her steps matching mine as I push her back, guiding her out of the way without taking my eyes off the shape ahead. The thing

shifts again, the growl stretching out, slow and low. Closer.

Whatever it is, it's coming towards us.

I need us in an open space. Not that there's anywhere to run. I'm not going back into that field, though. I'd rather face this thing here than risk what's in there.

It steps out of the shadows, one massive paw—if you can even call it that—on the path.

Alice gasps, a sharp intake of breath. “Oh, God.”

“We need more than God.”

I square my body, putting myself just in front of her. My hand grips the knife tightly, but my focus stays locked on the creature as it emerges. Its body is cloaked in black, the fur-like smoke swirling and rippling as though it's alive. It moves with a fluid, unnatural grace, its wolfish face twisted and wrong.

Its mouth stretches too wide, the rows of jagged teeth glistening as its lips peel back in a snarl. Every part of it is shifting—muscle and shadow blending seamlessly—making it impossible to tell where the beast ends and the mist begins. But none of that matters. My eyes are fixed on its face. On those teeth.

“It's a Bandersnatch,” Alice says, her voice barely above a whisper.

Of course it is.

The creature—Bandersnatch lets out another low growl, the sound like a rumble of thunder rolling through my bones. I tighten my grip on the knife. It's pitiful against something like this, but it's all I've got.

I have no bloody idea what that is. “What the hell is a Band—”

Before I can finish, the thing—the *Bandersnatch*—lets out a bone-shaking roar that rattles through my chest. Instinctively, I shove Alice further behind me. If I could get her out of here, I would, but right now, I have to keep this thing focused on me. Just me. I need it looking at me, because I'll take this bastard down if it's the last thing I do.

It takes the bait.

Shit.

The beast lunges forward, faster than anything its size has any right to be. I sidestep, yanking Alice with me just as its claws rake the ground where we'd been standing moments before.

“Move,” I snap, shoving her forward. “Fucking *run*.”

And we do. I drag Alice as we bolt into the trees.

The Bandersnatch doesn't hesitate to follow. Bloody hell, it's fast—too fast. It leaps and skids, snarling and snapping at us, its massive body crashing through the undergrowth as if it's nothing but paper.

I duck behind a tree, shoving Alice into the hollow of its trunk. "Stay here," I hiss.

Of course, she doesn't listen.

We don't have time to argue. The thing barrels toward us, but it doesn't move like any normal beast. Oh no, that would be far too simple. Instead, it twists and *blends* with the forest itself. It doesn't go around the trees—it *moves through them*, its body warping and reforming as if the laws of physics are beneath it.

Alice scrambles back, her eyes wide with terror. "Don't—" I start, but she grabs a branch. A thick one, something she clearly plans to use as a makeshift weapon.

It's not going to do a damn thing.

But it does make the creature pause.

The Bandersnatch growls again, low and guttural, its glowing eyes fixed on us. Alice and I are side by side now, breathing hard as its hot, rancid breath steams out in heavy bursts.

It begins to circle us, its hulking form rippling with each movement. The air thickens around us, cold and damp. I can feel the monster waiting, calculating, searching for the perfect moment to strike.

When it finally does, we're both ready.

The Bandersnatch launches itself, claws outstretched, jaws gaping. Alice and I dart in opposite directions, splitting its focus. It chooses me.

The beast crashes toward me, its massive bulk careening through the mist. I duck low, slashing at its side with my knife as it leaps past. The blade barely scratches it, but the sting is enough to make it roar in fury. It spins on its haunches, smoke-like fur swirling around it as it locks its glowing eyes on me again.

"Hook," Alice's sharp voice cuts through the chaos.

I turn just in time to see her hurl the branch. It strikes the Bandersnatch square in the face.

It doesn't hurt it—not even close.

But it enrages the creature, and it shifts its attention to her.

It leaps.

I don't think. I just *move*.

Throwing myself between them, I collide with the beast mid-air. Its weight slams into me, knocking me to the ground so hard that drives the air from my lungs. My knife clatters uselessly to the side as I grit my teeth, bracing against the sheer power of it.

Its claws press into my chest, pinning me to the cold, damp earth. The stench of its breath washes over my face, sharp and rancid, as its glowing eyes bore into mine. They're filled with rage, hunger, and something far worse—something primal and unrelenting.

I force myself to meet its gaze, even as every instinct in my body screams to fight or flee. But right now, I can't do either. My arms shake as I push against the crushing weight of it.

My knife. I need my fucking knife. As small and useless as it is, it's all I've got.

"Alice," I grit through clenched teeth, struggling beneath the beast. She's somewhere nearby—I catch flashes of her through the corner of my vision as I fight to keep the Bandersnatch from crushing me into the mud. My chest burns, and the pressure pushes me deeper into the earth.

Then I see her. She darts forward, grabbing a rock as she moves. Before I can yell at her to stay back, she hurls it at the Bandersnatch's head.

The rock strikes its temple with a dull *thud*.

The beast rears back, roaring in fury. Its weight shifts, just enough for me to move.

I twist out from beneath it, using my legs to shove the massive thing off me. My hands scramble through the dirt, desperate, until my fingers clasp around the hilt of my knife.

With a quick flick of my wrist, I drive the blade upward, slicing through smoke and bone.

The Bandersnatch howls, a sound that rips through the air and claws at my skull. Something black and wet splatters across me—hot and cold all at once—but I don't stop. I wrench the blade free and shove myself to my feet.

"Get back," I shout to Alice.

She doesn't listen. Instead, she's suddenly at my side, grabbing my arm, pulling me back. "Run," she says, her voice sharp and urgent.

I don't need telling twice.

We bolt for the trees, the underbrush tearing at our clothes as the roar of the Bandersnatch follows close behind. The ground is uneven, roots and stones threatening to send us sprawling at every step.

I risk a glance over my shoulder.

The thing is relentless, crashing through the forest with the force of a battering ram. Trees splinter under its massive frame, branches snapping like twigs.

“This way,” I bark, dragging Alice sharply to the left. The trees grow thicker here, their gnarled trunks pressed so close together it feels like the forest itself is trying to swallow us. Tangled branches form a canopy overhead, blocking out what little light there is. The Bandersnatch slows, its bulk struggling to navigate the tighter space.

“It’s still coming,” Alice pants, her voice tight.

“God damn thing...”

Ahead, the forest thins, giving way to a small clearing. A dark shape looms in the centre—broad and weathered, half-covered by creeping vines and moss.

No, not just a shape. A building.

“There,” I shout, nodding toward it.

Alice squints, her eyes widening as we draw closer. “It’s a... teapot?”

She’s right. The building is shaped like a damn teapot. Its rounded walls slump to one side, bricks missing in places where the structure has begun to crumble. But it’s a teapot, nonetheless.

We don’t stop to question it. I shove the door open, the hinges creaking loudly, and push Alice inside ahead of me. The interior is dim, the light barely strong enough to reveal the state of the room. It’s a crumbling ruin, but someone must have lived here once.

There are overturned tables and broken chairs scattered about. A sofa sits half-sunken near a shattered fireplace, and the air reeks of damp and decay.

I press my back against the door, trying to steady my breathing. Alice sinks to the floor beside me, her chest heaving.

The Bandersnatch hasn’t slammed into the building after us—not yet. But it’s out there. Its guttural growls rumble through the air, and its heavy paws pound against the earth. We stay as still and quiet as we can, not wanting to draw its attention.

The creature is hunting us.

I tighten my grip on my blade, feeling the sticky mix of sweat and blood coating my hands. My pulse pounds in my ears, but I force my breathing to stay steady.

Alice shifts beside me, pushing herself upright just enough to glance out of the window. “I can’t see it,” she whispers.

I shove to my feet and move to the window, standing beside her. The glass is filthy and streaked with dust. I swipe a small patch clean with my hand, squinting into the clearing beyond. “I can’t see it either,” I mutter, but I know it’s out there. Waiting. Watching.

I tilt my head, listening, straining to catch the faintest sound of movement.

The forest is still.

“I think it’s leaving,” I say quietly, focusing on the sound of the Bandersnatch’s heavy footsteps fading into the distance.

Alice exhales slowly, her hand brushing against mine as we both remain frozen by the window, neither of us daring to move too soon. “What the hell is that thing doing out here? I thought...” She shakes her head, frustration flickering across her face. “The last time I was here, that thing was definitely not.”

“I’m guessing it’s guarding whatever’s up there.” I nod toward the gates we’d seen across the field. From the teapot, we have a clear view of them now—the iron gates standing tall and foreboding, their intricate filigree twisted like vines. Beyond them, a winding stone path snakes up the hill toward a structure that gleams faintly, even in the dim, misty light.

The building at the top is magnificent and haunting all at once. It looks like something plucked straight from the mind of a mad architect—grand and sprawling, its golden spires stretching upward as if trying to pierce the sky. The walls are a patchwork of aged ivory stone, cracked and weathered with time, but still shimmering faintly as if imbued with their own magic. Massive, circular windows glint in the faint light, some stained with vibrant colours that cast fractured patterns on the surrounding mist.

The roof is crowned with ornate domes, each one gilded and etched with strange symbols that seem to shift when looked at too long. Vines creep along the lower walls, their deep green tendrils curling possessively around the foundation. The entrance, framed by two towering columns, is imposing—a dark, yawning archway that seems to breathe menace.

“It’s like...” Alice whispers, her words trailing off as she stares at it.

“Like Wonderland vomited up a palace,” I finish.

Her lips twitch into something that’s almost a smile, but her gaze doesn’t waver. “It’s beautiful. In a terrifying, ‘I probably shouldn’t go in there’ kind of way.”

I let out a breath, my hand tightening around the hilt of my knife. “Unfortunately, love, that’s exactly where we’re going. I’ll bet my life that is where the amulet is.”

Chapter Fifty-Eight

ALICE

THE BANDERSNATCH IS GONE. Or going.

I take a step away from the wall and the window, my heart still pounding, my breath still uneven. The air feels different now—quieter, lighter—but I don't trust it. That thing is out there, somewhere in the woods, waiting. Watching.

But Hook's right. Whatever's at the top of that hill must be important. Grand, guarded, with a monster lurking around it like a sentry—there's no way it's not something the Queen wants to keep hidden.

Hook said it himself. She's draining Wonderland, stealing its magic to keep herself going. So whatever's up there? It's what's keeping her alive. If it's the amulet, if it's the source of her power, then we have no choice. We have to go.

I don't know how. I don't know if we'll survive it.

I move around the room, needing something—anything—to keep my hands busy, to keep my mind from circling back to what's waiting for us outside. My fingers drag over the dusty sideboard, the crumbling shelves, the chipped and forgotten plates stacked precariously. I tug open a drawer.

Empty.

Another.

This one is full of dried leaves, brittle and curled. Someone must have been gathering them for kindling, but they never got the chance to use them.

I let the drawer slide shut, glancing at Hook. He's still by the window, his silhouette framed against the murky light seeping through the grimy glass. His body is tense, jaw tight. He doesn't say a word, but I can see it—the constant working of his mind, the endless planning, calculating.

That's Hook, isn't it? Always in control. Always one step ahead.

"Why didn't the Bandersnatch come after us in here?" I ask, leaning against the sideboard, arms crossed. I'm not really asking him. More thinking out loud. "Why didn't it ram the door or something? Seems like its whole thing is smashing through stuff."

Hook's gaze flicks to mine, unreadable. "I don't know, love," he says after a moment. "Maybe it can't see us in here. Maybe it doesn't sense the same way other creatures do." He shrugs, rolling his shoulders like it doesn't matter. "Or maybe it's just bloody stupid."

His voice is dry, but there's a weight to it, something quieter than usual. He's always sharp, always moving, always throwing words like knives. But now? He feels still. And it unsettles me.

I want to ask him things. I don't.

Instead, I watch as he moves around the room, assessing, deliberate. He makes his way to the table and chairs, setting them upright one by one. For a second, I think he might sit. He doesn't. Instead, he pulls out the map, laying it flat on the table.

I swear it looks different every time I see it. The lines shift, the shapes pulse, like it's alive, like it knows.

I step closer, drawn in despite myself. Hook doesn't pull it away, doesn't shift to block my view. He leans over it, hands braced on either side of the table, eyes scanning the parchment with the same careful attention he gives everything. His posture is firm, commanding. But his shoulders—there's something heavy there.

"Do you have a plan?" I ask.

His eyes lift to mine, sharp but not unkind. "Just that we need to get up there," he says, nodding toward the structure visible through the window.

If it were me, I'd already be halfway out the door. Maybe I'd make it. Maybe I'd die. Hook doesn't do that. He doesn't rush. He doesn't panic.

It's infuriating.

And it's reassuring.

I look down at the map, at the golden building at its centre. It doesn't look the same as it does outside. Here, it's dull, lifeless, like the heart of

something rotting from the inside out. My fingers brush the edge of the parchment.

Hook doesn't stop me.

The map reacts.

A tingling sensation spreads through my hand, buzzing under my skin. Not quite heat—more like a current, electric and alive. I suck in a breath, startled.

The dull centre ripples. Light spreads outward in faint waves, like drops hitting still water.

"Touch it again," Hook says, voice low, careful. There's curiosity there, but something else, too.

I hesitate, but his eyes stay on me—steady, insistent.

So I do it. I press my fingers against the centre of the map again. This time, the ripples spread farther, the dull ink shifting, twisting. Colour blooms in faint streaks, as if the map itself is waking up.

"Your whole hand," he murmurs.

Before I can move, Hook steps closer, his presence pressing in from behind. His hand closes around my wrist, firm but not rough. He doesn't wait for me to do it myself. Instead, he guides my palm down, pressing it flat against the parchment. His hand stays over mine, his warmth sinking into my skin.

My breath catches. He's too close. I feel it, the weight of him, the heat. The air between us thickens, and I glance up—only to find him already watching me. His dark eyes flicker with something I don't have the nerve to name, something that sends a shiver down my spine.

The map pulses.

The ripples spread outward like wildfire, the once-lifeless centre glowing faintly. The ink moves, reshaping itself, and I can't look away. It's alive, reacting to me.

Hook doesn't let go. Doesn't step back. His chest brushes against my shoulder as we both watch the map shift beneath my touch.

"What's it doing?" I whisper.

His breath is warm against my temple when he answers. "It's responding to you. It knows you."

In the centre of the map, the faded, dull structure is gone. Now, it's bright. Vibrant. It almost hums with energy. It reminds me of a theme park

map, the kind that makes everything look larger than life, designed to pull you in.

“If there was ever any doubt about where your amulet is,” I say, my voice quieter than I expect, “I think it’s safe to say that’s gone now. This is where we have to go, isn’t it?”

Hook finally lets go. His hand drags down his face before raking through his hair. He’s still watching me, staring in that way he does—like he’s trying to pick me apart, like there’s something beneath my skin he’s trying to see.

“What?” I frown. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You don’t know, do you?” he says after a beat, his voice low, almost incredulous. “You really don’t have a clue.”

“Know what?” My frown deepens. “There’s some big secret I’m missing?”

His lips twitch, but the smirk isn’t his usual one. It’s not smug, not mocking. There’s something behind it, something raw, something almost uncertain. “You have no idea what you’re capable of.”

He pushes away from the table, his boots scuffing against the floor as he crosses to the window. His shoulders are stiff, his posture tight. I don’t know what to say. I don’t even know what to ask.

“What do you mean?” My voice is quieter now. “Are you talking about magic?”

“When I was in the field,” he says, still facing the window, “I heard you calling me.”

“I was shouting for you to wake up.”

He nods, shoving his hands into the pockets of his coat. “With Dreamthorn, you don’t hear anything. You’re gone. You shouldn’t have been able to reach me—not even a whisper, not even a hint of it. But you did. I heard your voice, and that shouldn’t have been possible.”

I stare down at my hands, still resting against the table, and slowly lift them. I turn them over, searching for something—some proof, some sign of whatever magic he’s talking about. But they’re just my hands. Pale. Normal.

“Maybe it’s different here,” I say. “Maybe... because Neverland is the place of dreams, and Wonderland is the place of wonder, it doesn’t work the same. Maybe it’s not as strange as you think.”

His eyes are on me again before I even realise he's turned. That look—sharp, unyielding—pins me in place. Makes my pulse skip. “Like I said, you really don't get it.”

“There's nothing to get.” I drop my hands, my fingers brushing the edge of the table. “It's just this place, that's all. Like you in the field. It was magic. Just magic and this place's—” I stop, hesitating. Then, before I can second-guess it, I ask, “What were you dreaming about? You kept calling someone's name. Someone called Sam?”

His whole body goes still.

It happens so fast that, for a second, I think I imagined it. But then I see it—the tension in his shoulders, the way his jaw tightens just enough to give him away.

“No one,” he says sharply. “It was nothing.”

It isn't my place—I know that. But the way he stands there, the way he won't look at me, the way his fingers twitch like they want to clench into fists but he won't let them... it doesn't look like nothing.

His movements are slow, deliberate, when he walks to the window. But he doesn't peer out into the mist. He presses his forehead against the glass, his hands braced on the frame. I can't see his face, but I don't need to.

It feels like his eyes are closed. Like he's battling something far heavier than this moment.

“Who is he?”

For a long time, I think he won't answer.

Then, finally, he shifts. He turns, and I see it—the kind of pain that makes my chest ache just looking at him. The kind of grief that sits deep, so deep you don't even realise how much of you it's taken until it's too late.

Hook reaches into his coat. Pulls out a folded piece of parchment.

He unfolds it carefully, like the act itself is fragile. And when he holds it out to me, my breath catches.

The painting is simple but beautiful, the kind of work that feels alive. It shows a boy—young, bright-eyed, his grin wide and full of mischief. Beside him, a woman, her arms wrapped around him, her face soft and warm.

“Sam was my brother,” Hook says. “And she was our mother.”

He lifts his gaze then, and our eyes meet. My heart aches.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

ALICE

AM I A FISH? Yes, yes, I am. Because I asked a question I shouldn't have, and now I'm completely and utterly *hooked* on the line he threw me.

But it's *absolutely* not my place to dig deeper.

I can't stop myself.

My gran always told me I was a nosy bugger, and maybe she was right. That's probably how I got myself into Wonderland in the first place, isn't it? Not knowing when to walk away. Not knowing when *not* to look at things. Curiosity killed the cat, and all that.

And now? My mind won't stop pulling at this damn thread.

I shouldn't want to know.

But I *do*.

It wants me to understand what's taken the infamous, cocky Captain Hook and left him with *that* look in his eyes—one that's far too deep, far too raw, far too *sad*.

That sadness *pulls* at something inside me, something hollow and aching, something that shouldn't be there.

Even if half the time I'm ready to *kill* him.

He pulls at me in ways I don't understand—ways Chris never has. This place, this world... it's just another layer of the unknown.

And maybe that's just another layer of all this madness—another piece of me I don't fully understand. Because I stand here, silent, like an idiot,

staring at Hook while my brain tries to untangle what the hell I'm supposed to do.

It's actually him who speaks first, not me.

"It's your grandmother's funeral today," he says. "You told me that before."

I nod, surprised he remembers. "It's why I was at my mother's house and how I ended up back here. I was in London for the funeral."

I glance at the dusty floorboards, and a pang of guilt coils tight in my chest.

"I think I might miss it," I admit. "Maybe I already have."

I don't even know what *day* it is. I don't know how much time has passed back in the real world.

And I don't know how I *feel* about that.

Did I really *want* to be there? To see my gran's coffin? To *know* her body was in there, cold and lifeless—a shell of the person she was to me?

Did I *need* that?

"You didn't really want to go," he says, but it isn't a question. And when his eyes meet mine, they're deep and knowing. "I never got to go to Sam's funeral. He died when I was nine. He was eight. And I..."

He stops.

I don't fill the silence for him.

A raw Hook is *rare*.

But he doesn't say more, and for a moment, it's like I can see every emotion running across his face, battling for space. He frowns, presses his lips together, then lifts his gaze properly—looking *at* me, not just through me.

But *eight* and *nine*?

That's no age to lose a brother.

And no age to *die*.

"I'm sorry," I say, and I mean it. "Losing a sibling at any age is hard."

I think about Grace. About whether I'd be upset if something happened to her.

Maybe?

I don't think I'd mourn *her*, exactly. I think I'd mourn the *possibility* of ever having the sister I *wanted*.

Is that selfish?

Probably.

But there's still some tiny, fragile thing in me that clings to the idea that maybe *one day*, my mother and sister might see me for *me*—not as their failure. Not as the thing that ruined their lives.

"How did he die?" I dare to ask.

"He drowned."

The words are quiet. Aching.

"He fell into the river, and I..." His voice breaks. He stops, lifting his hands, pressing them together in front of his mouth like a prayer. His thumbs press hard against his chin, his eyes squeezing shut. "I couldn't go in after him," he whispers. "I..."

But he stops again.

And I *see* it—how the wall comes slamming down, how he *forces* himself back behind it. He squares his shoulders. Pulls the Captain Hook mask back into place. "It was a long time ago."

Just like that, he turns away, crossing the room towards the window. His hand presses against the glass, his gaze fixed somewhere beyond the trees.

"It might be safe for us to head out," he says, his voice casual. Forced. *Distant*. Like he *hasn't* just ripped himself open in front of me. Like he *hasn't* just changed the subject so brutally.

But I hear it.

The way his voice tightens. The way it *means* something else, even if he'll never say it aloud.

"Maybe we'll be in luck," he mutters, "and the thing's gone off to lick its wounds."

My chest heaves, and I don't have any words—my mind isn't catching up to where he is. I can't just snap back to normal after that, not after what it *made* me feel.

I don't even know why it did or why I do it, or even what comes over me. But I move.

I stride across the room, across the dusty floor and tattered rug, closing the gap between us in two steps—

And then I stop.

My mind catches up at the last second, yanking me back before I go *too* far. I freeze just short of him, close enough to feel the space between us crackle, too close to ignore the pull—but not close enough to cross that final line.

Those dark, calculating eyes lock onto mine, but he says nothing.
I wait.

I want him to speak, to say *something*, to break the tension. But he doesn't. And for some reason, that makes it worse.

"Hook, I—"

He exhales sharply. "We should move. If the Bandersnatch—" He stops. His whole body goes rigid, his breath catching mid-sentence. Before I can even begin to process what's happening, his hand grips my arm, yanking me forward.

Then his mouth is on mine.

It's not gentle. Not careful. It's fierce and unrelenting, and oh so completely, Hook.

One second, I'm frozen. The next, I'm in it—heat, desperation, something wild and reckless between us like it's been waiting for this moment to break loose.

Maybe it has.

My breath catches. My fingers curl into his coat, anchoring myself as everything tilts. His hands frame my face, holding me in place, pulling me in like he's drowning, like I'm the only thing keeping him from going under.

And then—

He stops.

His breathing is rough, his forehead inches from mine. His grip lingers, his thumbs brushing against my skin, like he's memorising the shape of me. His bottom lip drags slowly between his teeth, and my stomach tightens at the sight.

Then he lets go.

The absence is immediate, like cold air rushing in. He starts to turn away, but I reach for his hand before I can stop myself.

I don't do things like this. I don't chase. I don't reach first. Chris used to say that was one of my problems—that I never made the first move.

But this is Hook.

And I *can't* let him go.

"Hook," I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

He pauses but doesn't turn fully. My fingers slide into his, and his hand closes around mine, warm and firm. I want to pull him back to me. To feel

his mouth on mine again. To let myself fall into this, into *him*. A million things I shouldn't want.

Because I *do* have Chris.

Back home, he's waiting. He's worried. If time has passed, if I've been gone longer than I realise, then right now, he's probably losing his mind.

And yet I'm *here*. With Hook.

What kind of person does that make me?

Hook lifts his gaze from the floor so slowly it almost hurts to watch, like he's clawing his way up from somewhere deep. He swallows hard.

"It was my fault Sam died," he says, his voice low and rough. "My fault my mother died. My fault the Queen of Hearts has the amulet. My fault

"Neverland is dying." He pauses, jaw tight. "I break everything I touch." His grip tightens, then loosens, like he's forcing himself to let go. "I will not ruin you." His voice drops even lower, like the words cost him something. "You deserve the world and I do not."

Chapter Sixty

HOOK

I NEED TO MOVE.

We need to move.

I step back, turning toward the window again, trying not to think about what I just did. If I let myself think about it, I might do it again.

And I *can't* do that.

She doesn't deserve it.

And this isn't the time or place.

I didn't come here for this.

"We need to go," I say, my voice rougher than I mean it to be.

Alice doesn't say anything, but I can *feel* her watching me. She doesn't push. Doesn't question.

I glance out at the woods beyond the glass. The air looks clearer now, the red mist from the field pulling back, or maybe it's just *me*. Maybe something in my head has shifted. I'm not even going to *start* unpacking whatever the fuck *that* means.

"I think we should go outside," I say. "Try to get to those gates."

Still, she says nothing.

So I do what I do best—I push forward.

I adjust my coat, check for my *useless* knife, and head for the door.

This is what I know.

Not standing still.

Not lingering in the wreckage of something I shouldn't want.

I press my ear against the wood, listening.

All I hear is the sound of my own *damn* heartbeat, loud and useless in my chest. Fuck that thing. It doesn't *know*. It doesn't *understand*.

And the only thing it's going to do is get me killed.

Or worse—get *her* killed.

I push the handle down slowly, ready to shove the door shut if that *thing* is outside waiting for us.

Cool air seeps through the crack, raising the hairs on my arms.

"I think we're clear," I say.

I open the door and step outside, scanning the area. I motion for Alice to follow, and we both step out into what *feels like* morning light. I've woken up enough times at dawn to recognise it, to know exactly what it is.

The sky is shifting. Still dark, still that murky hour before it's fully morning, but hints of light streak across the horizon.

Time is strange here. It's fast one moment, slow the next. But this isn't the place to try and make sense of which way is up and which way is down.

This is Wonderland.

I listen.

Nothing.

No footsteps. No twigs snapping. No snarling. That's the sound I'd be listening for the most. The silence is a *gift*.

As much as a part of me wants to shove Alice back inside and keep her there, I know I *can't*.

No matter what I feel. No matter what I *want*.

The mirror said it.

She is the key.

I step out further, and Alice follows, both of us moving cautiously as we make our way back toward the path we came from.

Maybe we're far enough now. Maybe we can make it. If we get to the path, we can follow it to the gates. To the hill. And maybe—just *fucking* maybe—we won't come face-to-face with that *thing* again.

No such damn luck.

A snarl rips through the air behind us, and we freeze.

We turn at the same time, and my stomach *drops* when I see it.

Fucking *idiot*.

Me.

My gaze locks onto the source of the sound—the bright yellow eyes, the shifting, shadowy figure pulsing in and out of view. It sits on the roof of the teapot-shaped house, lips pulling back to bare those jagged, gleaming teeth.

It didn't leave.

It was waiting.

Chapter Sixty-One

ALICE

OH, hell no. How the hell did we even fall for that? The oldest trick in the book, and we walked right into it.

Idiots.

Hook's hand clamps on my arm, dragging me backward. There's no getting back inside that house. Not now. Not with the Bandersnatch on the roof, its massive paws pressing into the tiles. Even if we did manage to get inside, it'd tear through the place like the walls were made of paper.

"Shit," I breathe, my chest already burning. My heartbeat slams into my ears, pounding so hard I feel it in my throat.

The Bandersnatch takes a step forward, claws scraping over the slate, weight pressing down into the structure beneath it. Too heavy. Too damn heavy. The tiles shift, bending, bowing, ready to collapse. But the roof caving in is the least of our problems.

I think.

Break. Break. Break.

I barely whisper the word, but I think it. Feel it. We need it to happen, because right now, that thing is poised to leap, and I don't know where it might land. And even if we run—it's fast. Too fast.

"When I say run, you run," Hook whispers.

"Run where?" There's nowhere to go. The field. The forest. The gates. All impossible. All beyond our reach.

Hook still pulls me back, slow and deliberate. His free hand inches toward his knife, even though we both know that thing won't do shit. It didn't last time. It barely slowed it down.

I grit my teeth, fists clenched so tightly my nails bite into my palms. The jagged mouth of the Bandersnatch gapes wide, strings of drool dripping from its knife-like teeth. No. I'm not looking at that.

Its glowing eyes lock onto us, waiting—watching.

One wrong move and this thing will lunge.

Break. Please, oh. "Please break."

I shove the word out like a command, like I can force the roof to do what I want. I try to feel it, to make the word more than just a thought in my head. As if I can take it, push it down my arms, out of my body, and into the real world.

I know I can't. I know it's ridiculous—even if Hook and even Sophie said otherwise. But part of me, a small, tiny part, thinks... what if?

So I try.

I clench and unclench my fists. I grind my teeth so damn hard I'll need an orthodontist when I get back home. And I push. Everything in my chest. Every ounce of will.

And then—it happens.

The Bandersnatch shifts its weight. The slate under its massive paw cracks. Then another. And before either of us knows what's happening, the roof caves inward. Tiles slide off, stone and wood collapsing with a deafening crash, swallowing the beast in an explosion of dust and debris.

A strange, snarling growl rips through the air.

"Run," Hook says.

I don't hesitate. We bolt.

We sprint toward the gates. Toward the path leading to the place we saw through the window—the one that glowed on the map, shimmering with something unnatural.

It has to be safe.

It has to be where we need to go.

Hook is right behind me, pushing me forward, urging me faster. I try, sucking air down into my lungs, taking deep gasps to keep going. My legs burn, my breaths hurt my ribs, but I don't slow down.

My dress.

Too damn long. The fabric twists at my legs, snagging, pulling. If I had half a second, I'd rip the damn thing off just to be able to move faster.

Behind us—

Splintering wood. A snarl. A crash.

The Bandersnatch is out of the house.

Oh, God.

It tore right through the walls.

"Fuck," Hook growls as he levels with me, his hand pressing against my back, shoving me forward.

I risk a glance over my shoulder.

Mistake.

The Bandersnatch is coming.

I can't see it clearly, but I feel it. The debris flying around it, the way the trees seem to bend in its wake. It feels faster than before.

"Use your magic," Hook shouts.

"I can't. I don't know how."

"You do. Reach for it."

It's hard to think when you're running for your life. Hard to focus on anything except the thing behind us.

But I try.

I try to picture something—anything—but all I see is teeth, claws, and blood. My mind won't stay where I need it to be. I don't even know how to use my magic, and my brain still doubts it even exists.

Magic.

I don't have damn magic.

My mind scrambles as I try, grasping for anything—any instinct, any spark, any power that might be buried inside me. I throw my hands out—like I did with the spiders, like I can will something into them. As if I can force the magic out the way Peter Parker throws webs from his hands.

I almost visualise that.

Maybe if I could just launch something—trap it, hold it back, keep it from gaining on us—

The ground shudders.

Dirt explodes upwards, a violent burst of earth and stone. Tangled roots surge from below, like something set off a landmine under the soil. It's not just a spray of dirt—it's a blast. The force sends rocks and mud spiraling into the air, thick enough to block the sky for half a second. Twigs and

shards of bark shoot out like deadly shrapnel, cutting through the air, splintering against tree trunks, bursting apart on impact.

The Bandersnatch howls.

I can't see it—can't tell if I hit it or if it's just pissed—but I don't care.

"Do it again," Hook barks.

I latch onto whatever I just found inside myself, grab it tight, and force it out. Like I can rip the earth apart, like I can take the ground and throw it into the air like a weapon—

And I do.

A tree cracks in the middle, the sound splitting through the air like thunder, only thicker—denser. Then the tree falls, slamming down with a groaning roar.

"Again."

We're still running, but we've slowed. My body moves on instinct, in sync with his, but my mind is lagging behind. I can see it now—the magic in my head, clear as a film playing in front of me.

So I do it again.

I shove the something down my arms, force it out—magic, energy, thought—I don't know, and right now, I don't care.

As long as it stops that thing from gaining on us—

The earth erupts. Closer this time.

Does that mean it's getting closer? Probably.

A boom—deep and raw, like the land itself is breaking apart.

The ground splits.

Two massive pillars of dirt, roots, and shattered stone burst from the earth, ripping upward just as the Bandersnatch leaps.

It's midair.

All teeth and claws, soaring toward us—

And then—

The debris swallows it whole.

The walls crash together, burying it beneath a wave of mud and rubble. Shattered limbs of trees cascade over it, covering its monstrous form.

A snarl rips through the mass—muffled, struggling.

But it's buried.

For now.

We run again, pushing toward the gates, down the path, like they're our only salvation—and maybe they are.

The path is overgrown, tangles of twisted roots and thick vines blocking the way. We didn't see it at first. Didn't notice how the earth itself had risen against us, closing the road ahead.

"Shit."

It's not a path anymore. It's not even climbable.

Bramble thorns stick out, vines snaking over the dirt like they're alive, like they're trying to keep us out.

Behind us, the Bandersnatch is digging its way free.

Hook grabs my wrist and yanks me aside, pulling me from the main trail.

"This way," he hisses.

I don't argue.

There's no time for that.

The hill—mountain—fortress, whatever this place is, looms over us, massive and unyielding. Someone, a long time ago, must have carved a winding path into the rock, leading upwards. The gates at the base stand tall, impenetrable, built from black iron and gold, symbols carved into their surface.

They glow faintly, thrumming with power.

I feel it.

It radiates from them, humming like a quiet warning.

Beyond the gates, the path is steep—too steep, almost vertical, like it isn't meant to be climbed. Yet the building at the top calls to me, shimmering against the sky like it's been waiting for me to find it. My breath catches.

If I closed my eyes and spun around in a hundred circles, I'd still be able to point exactly where it is.

But there's no way up.

No matter what I feel inside me, whatever pull I have, whatever connection, unless we get through those gates, we're not getting through there.

The jagged red cliffs stretch out like serrated knives, impossible to climb. But that's the point, isn't it? If something is this important, this protected, then it has to be guarded from all sides. That's what I'd do.

"Where are we going?" I gasp, breathless.

Hook doesn't slow.

"I don't fucking know. But putting as much distance between us and that thing."

He pulls me toward a cluster of fallen rocks, half-buried in the dirt, wedged against the base of the cliffside. It's not much shelter, but it's something. He shoves me behind them first, throwing a glance over his shoulder before ducking in beside me.

We're both breathing too hard, lungs fighting for air that doesn't seem to come fast enough. My chest is tight.

Like I'm drowning.

I brace myself against the rock, my head tipped back, trying to force oxygen down my throat.

"That thing was waiting for us," I whisper, barely able to get the words out. "The whole time, it was right there, on top of us."

I don't mean it as a question, but Hook answers anyway.

"Yep. And we bloody fell for it."

Hook pulls out his knife, scanning the ground as he does. He crouches, snatching up a long, thick branch—not quite a staff, not quite a weapon.

But it'll do.

He grips it with practiced hands, pressing the tip of his knife into the wood, carving it sharper, deadlier. Turning it into a spear.

I watch him for half a second before I hear it.

The Bandersnatch snarls—sniffing us out. Hunting.

But the sounds are fainter, thinner. It's moving in the other direction.

Its growls echo through the forest, twisting through the trees and bouncing off the cliff face, making it sound like it's everywhere at once.

I shudder, pressing my back against the stone.

"What do we do now?"

Hook keeps sharpening.

"You use your magic, and I use this."

His voice is steady, calm, but his hands move fast, his grip tense, his jaw set.

"I told you. I don't know how."

His dark eyes snap to mine, hard and unforgiving.

"You keep telling yourself that. You keep saying you don't have magic, but what was that back there if not magic? What did you do?"

"A panicked fluke. Wonderland's magic."

He stares at me for a long, hard second.

"Or yours."

I can feel the argument forming in my mouth, like something solid I could actually pull out and throw at him, but it doesn't want to come out.

It doesn't want to be spoken.

"It's just this place," I say.

But it feels like a lie.

Hook moves fast—so fast I don't have time to flinch back before he grabs my hand and pulls me to him.

There's something fierce in the way he looks at me, something so sincere it makes me want to look away—but at the same time, I can't stop looking at him.

"You lost your wonder, Alice."

I don't know what that means, but I feel it, sharp inside me, like a slow, twisting blade.

"What if I never had any?"

The words slip out before I can stop them.

A soft drumbeat thrums in my head, responding to them, answering them, like something inside me disagrees.

He doesn't let go of my hand.

Instead, he moves it—not to him, but to me.

Pressing it flat against my own chest, right over my heart.

He holds it there, his warmth sinking into me, and when he's sure I won't pull away, he lets go—but only so he can take my chin, tilting my head so the only way not to look at him is if I close my eyes.

"Once upon a time," he says, his voice low, steady, intentional, "a girl fell down a rabbit hole into a world ruled by a queen so mad, everyone around her had gone mad too."

My stomach tightens.

I know this story.

"Once upon a time," he continues, "a girl became something more."

I shake my head, but I don't look away from him.

"I'm not that girl anymore. She was just a kid full of dreams and useless pieces of imagination that got her nowhere."

Hook doesn't blink.

"No," he says. "She was a girl filled with dreams and power."

And then—

He kisses me.

His hand slides into my hair, fisting it, the other pressing against my chest, like he's trying to anchor me, feel my heartbeat against his palm.

His mouth is hard, demanding—fierce and real.

He tastes me, like he's searching for something. Like he's trying to find something in me.

And maybe—maybe he is.

But just as quickly, he stops.

My breath is ragged, my skin burns where he touched me, and my hand—

It's in his.

I don't know when that happened. But I squeeze his fingers tight—and he squeezes back.

His cheek presses against mine, the roughness of his stubble scraping my skin, his breath warm at my ear. His voice is soft, but the words cut deep. "The magic is inside you. It always was. Someone told you it wasn't, and you believed them. But you—" His grip tightens. "You are what Wonderland needs."

I'm breathless—not from running, not from fear—but from this.

This moment.

When he pulls back, he's still close—so close we're almost touching, so close the only thing I can see is him.

I want to let go of his hand, but not to let him go—so I can slide my fingers inside his coat, so I can feel the heat of his skin beneath his shirt.

His other hand moves along the side of my neck, fingers curling at the back, holding me there.

"Every world needs you, Alice. Go and get the amulet. Take it to Neverland. Give them their magic too."

"Hook, I..."

But he lets go.

So fast I stumble.

I reach for him, but he's already moving—already pulling away, already standing, already stepping back into the moment.

Because I hear it.

The Bandersnatch is coming.

Hook steps out, knife in one hand, makeshift spear in the other—and I realise what he's about to do.

"Hook, no—"

His gaze slams into mine, locking so deep I feel it in my chest.

Chapter Sixty-Two

HOOK

“I WAS NEVER MEANT to make it out of this, love.”
One last breath. One last look.
If I have to burn for something—at least it is you.

Chapter Sixty-Three

ALICE

A SWORD.

That's what he needs. Not a spear, not a branch. A goddamn sword.

I don't run. I won't. I'm not leaving him. I don't care what he said. I won't leave him.

Hook doesn't die today.

The Bandersnatch crashes into him, all muscle and smoke, its claws and teeth snapping too close, too fast. Hook barely manages to dodge, but there's no space, no time, no room to breathe.

The Bandersnatch slams into him, knocking him back. Hook twists, trying to stab at its side, trying to dig the spear into its body—but it doesn't bleed. It doesn't even react, like Hook is nothing, like his efforts don't count.

Hook twists, trying to pull back, but the Bandersnatch moves faster. Too fast. Too damn fast. Something that size shouldn't be able to move like that. It shouldn't be this quick.

Its massive paw lashes out, claws tearing through the air, and Hook barely manages to stumble back in time. If he were even a second slower, that thing would have ripped him open right there.

But he's not fast enough.

The Bandersnatch lunges, all raw power and snapping teeth. Hook moves to block, shoving the spear up, ramming it between the monster's

jaws. The wood locks between its fangs, holding them apart just inches from Hook's throat.

But the thing is too strong.

Its teeth clamp down, biting into the spear with brutal force. The wood groans and cracks, splinters flying everywhere. Hook digs his boots into the ground, muscles straining, pushing back with everything he has. But he's losing.

The spear won't hold.

I can see it—feel it. It's about to snap and then that thing will rip into him, and there's nothing I can do. He'll die, and I'll be next.

No.

I move.

I don't think. I don't hesitate. My body reacts before my brain does, feet slamming into the ground as I sprint forward, faster than I thought I could move.

I need to stop this.

Now.

Hook shouts—I don't know if it's at me, at the monster, but it doesn't matter.

The Bandersnatch rears back and its massive jaws snap shut—right onto Hook's thigh.

No—

Hook crashes down. The Bandersnatch drags him backward, its teeth buried deep, and then—it shakes him. Violently. Like he's nothing.

Like he's already dead.

Hook grits his teeth, gasping through the pain, fighting back. His hand fumbles for his knife, yanks it free, and slashes at the monster's hide.

He stabs. He fights. The blade tears into thick, dark fur, but the Bandersnatch doesn't let go.

It shakes him harder, Hook's body jerking like a rag doll.

His knife arm weakens.

He's not winning.

And I'm not letting him die.

I throw my hands out, forcing the magic forward.

My entire body tenses, like something pulls at my bones, my skin, my breath—

The stick in his hand changes.

The brittle wood shifts—warps—twists.
Steel.

The blade erupts into something sharper, stronger, real. A sword. A weapon.

Hook's eyes widen for a split second. Then, with one last, desperate effort, he plunges the sword deep into the Bandersnatch's side.

The Bandersnatch howls, a sound that rips through the air, shaking the trees, the ground, my bones. it snaps and snarls. Smoke explodes from its body, twisting around Hook, wrapping around them both—

One second they're there—

The next—

Hook is thrown back, the force sending him skidding across the dirt. He rolls, twisting onto his side, scrambling to get away.

He pushes up, dragging himself to his feet, but his body betrays him. His knee buckles, slamming into the ground. His breath hitches, his teeth grit hard against the pain. He grips the sword, bracing it against the earth, using it to keep himself upright.

His eyes snap to me.

He knows.

He knows what I did.

But there's no time to acknowledge it.

The Bandersnatch is still standing.

It's not done.

Chapter Sixty-Four

ALICE

THE BANDERSNATCH DOESN'T RETREAT. It's wounded, viscous dark liquid dripping onto the dirt like oil, pooling beneath its massive paws. But instead of falling back like any sensible creature would, it lowers its head, those burning eyes locked onto Hook with predatory focus.

Its body shudders, and the shadows around it twist and reform—like it's stitching itself back together right before my eyes. Because of course it is. Nothing in this godforsaken place can ever be simple.

It's healing.

Oh, hell no.

I can't breathe. My pulse slams against my ribs like it's trying to escape, my hands trembling with that familiar cocktail of fear and adrenaline, but I don't stop. I can't. If I stop to process this properly, I'm dead. I'll freeze, and if I freeze, we both die—and I refuse to have "killed by shadow beast" as my epitaph.

Hook is still on one knee, gripping the sword like it's his last anchor to reality. Blood seeps down his leg in crimson rivulets, staining the dirt beneath him, but he doesn't look at that. He looks at me. Even now, the intensity in those steel-blue eyes makes my stomach flip.

For a second, neither of us moves.

The world slows, crystallising into that moment just before impact—that split second when you know you're going down, but you haven't hit

the ground yet. When time stretches land everything becomes painfully clear.

That's now.

The Bandersnatch just has to leap, and it's over.

Hook knows it. I can see it in the grim set of his jaw, in the white-knuckled grip on his sword.

I know it. The knowledge sits like ice in my gut.

And then—he moves.

He pushes up, sways just barely, but steadies himself with that infuriating grace he somehow maintains even while bleeding. The Bandersnatch snarls, its body flickering between solid and smoke, its glowing eyes burning into Hook as if it's waiting for something.

It doesn't lunge.

Doesn't attack.

What is it waiting for?

Hook adjusts his grip on the sword, jaw clenched so tight I swear I can hear his teeth grinding. He shifts, testing his injured leg, but we both know he's not fast enough. Not anymore.

And the Bandersnatch knows it.

The way we're positioned—Hook is between me and the Bandersnatch, playing hero even now. Stubborn, impossible man. It's just a question of which one of us strikes first.

The Bandersnatch moves.

Slow. Deliberate. Like it's savouring the moment.

One thick paw presses into the ground, its massive weight sinking into the dirt, and for the first time, I see its real fur—black and white, rippling like liquid shadow caught in a midnight breeze.

A thick black collar hangs from its neck.

Something golden dangles in the centre, catching what little light there is.

I act before I can think and throw my hands out, reaching not with my body, but with my mind. I pull.

And I feel it.

The magic. Power, raw and burning, right at my fingertips. It feels like touching a live wire, like grasping lightning itself.

I don't know what it is. I don't care. I'll question this new party trick later.

Because right now, it's real. Like something I can grasp and shape and use.

The Bandersnatch jerks.

Its body tenses, claws digging furrows into the ground, its jaws snapping like it's fighting off an invisible enemy. Which, technically, it is. Me. Though I'm starting to think this wasn't my brightest idea.

Hook's gaze snaps to me, and there's something in his eyes—surprise, certainly, but also something else. Something that makes my heart stutter despite our dire circumstances.

But I don't stop.

I dig deeper, pull harder—I'm flying blind here, working on pure instinct and desperation.

I just know I have to stop this thing. Before it takes Hook. Before it takes both of us.

So I picture it.

Chains.

Thick, unbreakable chains wrapping around its legs, binding it to this spot.

Roots.

Twisting up from the earth, dragging it down, holding it back like nature's own prison.

And as if by command—because apparently, I give those now—

The ground answers me.

Dark vines explode from the dirt, lashing around its limbs like vengeful serpents, tightening around its chest, its throat. They move with purpose, with hunger, as if they've been waiting for this moment.

The Bandersnatch thrashes, claws tearing at the vines, trying to break free—but they don't snap. They hold strong, fuelled by whatever power is coursing through me.

Hook doesn't hesitate.

His face is set, pain pushed aside with that stubborn determination I'm starting to find annoyingly attractive. He charges forward, moving like a man who's decided pain is just an inconvenient suggestion.

The Bandersnatch lets out a roar, its eyes flashing with something close to panic. For the first time, the monster looks afraid.

It tries to pull free, muscles bunching under that shadow-smoke fur.

It can't.

Hook raises the sword—the blade catching what little light there is—and drives it into the creature's chest with all the force of his considerable strength.

The blade sinks deep, piercing through flesh and smoke, straight into its core. The sound it makes—gods, the sound—like metal cutting through static and shadow.

The Bandersnatch lets out a sound—

Not a growl.

Not a snarl.

A scream.

A horrible, piercing sound of agony.

Its body convulses, shadows twisting violently, curling like smoke catching fire. The air crackles with dark energy.

The vines tighten, responding to my fear, my determination.

The ground shakes beneath our feet.

And then—

The Bandersnatch shatters.

A burst of black and red explodes outward, the force knocking me back. The shadows scatter like shards of broken glass, dissolving into nothing.

It vanishes—gone—nothing left but silence and the acrid smell of burnt shadows.

I barely register the moment Hook collapses.

He falls forward, gasping for breath, his hands shaking as the adrenaline begins to ebb.

His sword clatters against the ground—and he goes with it, still holding it, all that grace finally deserting him.

I rush to him, my heart in my throat.

Hook.

He rolls onto his back, his face slick with sweat, his breathing ragged. Even now, even like this, there's something magnetic about him that I can't quite ignore.

For a moment, he just stares at the sky, blinking, dazed. Then he lets out a rough, breathless laugh that shouldn't be as attractive as it is.

"Thanks, love," he mutters, his voice hoarse but warm.

He drops the sword, and the sound of metal hitting dirt seems to echo in the sudden quiet.

"You're an idiot, do you know that?"

Chapter Sixty-Five

HOOK

PAIN.

That's all I bloody know right now.

It tears through my leg, ripping into muscle, burning deep. Every nerve screams. The agony sinks in, determined to consume me whole. My breath catches, vision blurs, and I grit my teeth, sucking in air that does sod all to help. Nothing will.

I manage to scramble back to the rocks, leaning against them, leg bent at an awkward angle, fingers digging into dirt. The urge to shout builds in my chest, but I force it down. The Bandersnatch might be gone, but who knows what other nasty surprises are lurking? I don't have another fight in me. Not now.

I lean back, closing my eyes for a second.

Shit.

I'm not giving this bastard the satisfaction.

Alice appears beside me, suddenly too close, her hands reaching for my leg. The warmth of her fingers near my skin makes my pulse jump, but I shove her away.

"It's fine. Just a flesh wound."

She bats my hand aside with surprising strength. "What the hell was that?" Her eyes flash with something that looks dangerously close to concern. "Were you trying to get yourself killed?"

I blink at her, trying to focus past the fog of pain and the distracting way she's hovering over me. "Sometimes, a thanks is all you need to say," I mutter. "You know, I—"

Alice presses her hands against my leg without warning.

"Bloody fucking hell," I bite out, my vision going white for a second. Her touch sends electricity through my skin that has nothing to do with pain.

"It's gone deep into the muscle," she says, clinical and focused. But her fingers tremble slightly against my thigh.

"I told you, it's fine."

I push her hand away again and try to get up, to prove it. I've walked away from worse, fought bigger monsters than that thing. I grip the sword, using it to brace myself, trying to ignore how close she is, how her breath catches when I move.

My leg betrays me instantly.

The second I put pressure on it, pain explodes through me. My knee buckles, and a sharp cry escapes before I can trap it behind my teeth. I hit the ground hard, nearly smashing my head against the rocks.

Alice stares down at me, her expression unreadable but her eyes bright with something that makes my chest tight. I grit my teeth, trying to shove down both the humiliation and the way her proximity makes my skin buzz. "I just need a second," I say through clenched teeth. "That's all. Just a bloody second."

"You need a doctor."

I shake my head. "I don't think the Queen is handing out healers to those who commit treason. Though..." I trail off, distracted by how she shifts closer. "Is it really treason if we're not her people? And you..."

Alice is staring. "You're rambling." She takes the sword from me, not roughly, but firm enough that I let her. It isn't really taking if I let her, is it? Though watching her handle my weapon does something uncomfortable to my insides.

She doesn't hesitate. Doesn't falter. Like she's done this a hundred times before. She grips the blade and slices a strip from her dress, pulling it free without ceremony. Then, she sets the sword down just out of my reach.

Deliberate. Clever girl.

I don't know whether to be amused or fucking irritated. Both, probably.

"I don't suppose you've got a drink on you? A flask of—"

I raise a brow, reaching into my jacket, pulling out a small flask. Too small for what we both need right now.

Alice snatches it before I can get a proper grip.

"Now is really the time to be drinking?" I ask.

She uncaps it, takes a sniff, and—without warning—pours the damn thing over my leg.

"Bloody fucking—" Pain sears through me, sharp and immediate. A string of curses spills out that would make even my crew blush. "What the hell—that was my last—"

"Did you want vodka or an infected leg?" she says flatly, but there's a hint of something softer in her eyes.

"You didn't even give me the choice."

Alice doesn't bother answering. She just starts working on my leg, her movements swift, precise. Like this is just necessary. Like I'm just another task to check off. Like her touch isn't setting every nerve ending on fire.

Not because she cares.

Not that it should fucking bother me. But for some reason, it does. More than it should.

She presses the torn fabric against my leg, and—bloody hell—the pain tears through me. My body tenses, muscles locking up. But she doesn't let me move. She's strong. Stronger than she looks. Her grip tightens on my thigh, keeping my leg in place. My other foot comes up instinctively, but before I can thrash properly, she presses her hand down, just above the wound, and shoves me back.

"Christ—" I grit my teeth, breathing hard. "Are you trying to fix my leg or sever the damn thing?"

She glares at me, but there's colour in her cheeks now. "If I wanted to take it off, I'd have let the Bandersnatch do it."

Her hands move again—quick, firm, too efficient. But there's something else. Something in the way she's touching me. Each brush of her fingers against my skin feels deliberate, charged. Like she's trying not to notice it too.

And that's when I realise—

She's not wrapping my leg. She's not tying the cloth at all.

Her fingers press against my skin, just above the wound, and for the first time, Alice doesn't hesitate. She doesn't argue. She doesn't question

whether she can.

She just does.

She's using her magic, and no one told her to. No one forced her.

And somehow, that—that simple act—feels bigger than either of us. So I shut my mouth and watch her, trying to ignore how my body responds to every touch.

Alice presses her hand to my thigh, just beside the wound. Her fingers tremble for half a second before she stills them, her jaw tightening, focus narrowing. The determined set of her mouth shouldn't be distracting. It is.

The heat starts subtle, barely there. Then it spreads—slow, pulsing beneath her palm, sinking deeper. The fire in my leg doesn't disappear, but it shifts. The sharp, unbearable edge dulls, fading into something manageable.

I let out a breath, sinking into whatever the hell she's doing. Into her touch. I breathe in through my nose, out through my mouth, and with every exhale, the pain pushes further away.

Then Alice pulls her hands back, and the warmth vanishes. My eyes snap open, missing her touch before I can stop myself.

"What?"

She's frowning. No, not frowning—scowling. At me? At her hands?

"It doesn't work." She shakes her head, frustration tightening her features. She looks bloody gorgeous when she's angry, which is not what I should be noticing right now. "I don't even know why I thought it would. You all keep saying I have magic. I keep telling you I don't." Her voice wavers, just slightly, before she sets her jaw. "I should believe that. I do believe that. But I thought maybe..."

She trails off, shoving her hands into her lap like she's disgusted with herself. I hate seeing that look on her face.

I lift my leg, testing it. Pain lances beneath my skin, but it doesn't knock the breath out of me like before.

Alice catches the movement and glares. "Put your leg down."

She reaches for the cloth she tore from her dress, and this time, she actually starts wrapping it.

"It feels better," I say, watching her face.

She scoffs. "You're just saying that."

"I don't lie." Not to you, I almost add, but catch myself.

Alice shoots me a glare but doesn't say anything, just keeps working. Her fingers brush against my skin as she winds the fabric around my leg, each touch sending sparks through my blood. The wound is still there, raw, gaping, the deep indent of teeth marks carved into my flesh. But the pain isn't as sharp as it should be. It looks worse than it feels, and I know that's down to her, whether she believes it or not.

She pulls the fabric tight, tying it off with a firm knot. It's solid, secure. I don't flinch this time, too focused on how close she is, how her breath ghosts across my skin.

"I don't think you're going to be able to walk on that," she mutters, not meeting my eyes.

"Let me try."

I grip the rock beside me, using it to push myself up, keeping my leg as straight as I can. The fabric is tight, holding everything in place, but it makes movement stiff, difficult. Alice moves in beside me, sliding her arm under my shoulder, steadying me. The press of her body against mine is distracting. She takes on some of my weight, no hesitation, no complaint.

My leg trembles under the strain, but it holds. And the pain I expect—blinding, unbearable—doesn't come.

Alice stays close, her body tensed like she's ready to catch me if I fall. I won't. I refuse. But having her this near makes focusing on anything else a challenge.

I nod once. "It's good."

"Do you think you can walk?"

I have to. It's not a question of whether I can—there's no choice. We have to get up that path, get to whatever the hell is waiting for us at the top. The amulet is there. That's all that matters. Even if every step with her pressed against me is its own kind of torture.

I take a step, then another, bracing for pain that doesn't come. The wound is still there, deep and torn, but it doesn't burn the way it should. Alice watches me, concern poorly hidden behind her irritation. My leg holds, and I push forward.

Alice bends, picking up the sword. The movement draws my attention.

The weapon she holds isn't the makeshift blade I shoved between the Bandersnatch's jaws. That was just wood, a broken branch with a sharpened edge. But this—this is something else entirely.

Dark steel, perfectly balanced. The hilt fits her hand like it was made for her. Power radiates from the blade, something old, something dangerous. Something that matches the glint in her eyes.

I've seen a lot of weapons in my time. None have ever looked so right in someone's hands.

And she doesn't give it back. Of course she bloody doesn't.

Alice keeps the sword, hooking it into the belt of her dress. It's not a proper sheath, not even close, but it holds well enough. My fingers twitch, ready to protest, but she beats me to it.

"I don't think you're in a fit state to fight," she says, not even looking at me as she picks up my knife. The ghost of a smile plays at her lips.

She holds out the smaller blade, the metal catching what little light there is. A fraction of the weapon she's keeping for herself.

I take it with a scoff. "The princess and the pirate, and I get the little dagger?"

She shrugs, and damn if she doesn't look pleased with herself. "It's what you brought to the fight." Then, arching a brow, "Are we heading up that path, or arguing about armoury?"

I let out a breath, rolling my shoulders. My leg still holds. That's all that matters. That, and maybe the way she's still hovering close enough that I can feel her warmth.

"Fine," I mutter. "But if I die, I'm coming back to haunt you."

"You'd be rubbish at haunting," she says, but there's something soft in her voice that makes my chest tight.

Chapter Sixty-Six

ALICE

A PART of me keeps searching for the Bandersnatch as we make our way back to the path, leading to the gates. My eyes sweep the shadows, my ears strain for the low growl, the telltale shift of smoke curling through the trees. Nothing.

And even though I saw Hook run it through, I still don't trust the silence. Not here. Not in this place where normal rules don't apply. Just because I watched that thing vanish doesn't mean it's **gone**.

But as we walk, another part of me—one I really don't have the time or patience for—keeps glancing at **him**.

Keeps remembering.

The way his mouth crushed against mine. The heat of it, the way he **took**—like he had every right to. Like he knew I'd let him. Like he knew I'd **kiss him back**.

And I had.

God, I had.

My stomach knots because the memory of that kiss isn't soft or sweet. It's raw. **Bruising**. Fingers tangled in my hair, his grip possessive. The scrape of his stubble against my skin, the way my breath caught in my throat like I was drowning. The way I wanted it.

And now—now that moment lingers under my skin, curling hot and slow like embers refusing to burn out.

And what does **that** say about me?

I bite my bottom lip and force myself to breathe, to push the thought away, bury it somewhere it can't touch me.

Now is not the time.

Now is never the time.

The sword at my hip shifts awkwardly as I walk, knocking against my thigh with every step. If I were home—back in my world—something this irritating would've been tossed aside by now. But I don't take it off.

I **could** hand it to Hook, and for a second, I almost do.

But he's injured and... I don't know.

Some part of me—despite never wielding a sword in my life—wants to keep it. It **feels right**, having it. A strange sense of belonging I don't want to examine too closely.

It's this place. It's **changing me**.

Still, I don't give it back.

Hook used it like it was part of him. Like it belonged in his hand. No hesitation, no second-guessing. Just **instinct**. The perfect image of a pirate.

Not that my knowledge of pirates extends beyond *Pirates of the Caribbean* reruns, and let's be honest—watching Johnny Depp swagger around in eyeliner probably doesn't count as a solid education on piracy.

Hook walks beside me, his limp barely noticeable, but I see the way his jaw tightens every time he puts weight on his leg. **Stubborn bastard**. He'll pretend it doesn't hurt, pretend he's fine.

I start to slow, glancing up at the jagged red rocks ahead. "*Did we really run this far?*"

From this angle, the cliffs rise like a sheer mountain face, stretching impossibly high. The glittering building on the other side—the one we saw before—is hidden. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I'd swear there was nothing on the other side at all. Just endless rock and whatever twisted logic Wonderland decides to throw at us.

"No, we *didn't*," Hook says, slowing too. Not because of his leg this time, but because he's **looking**.

The sharp red stones jut out at odd angles, almost like jagged claws reaching for something unseen. Back home, people would probably try to **climb** this—adrenaline junkies with too much time on their hands. But here?

I don't see how or **why** anyone would.

The shards are **sharp**. Deadly. One wrong move—one slip—and you'd be impaled before you even had time to scream. It's like the earth spewed shards of rock and glass and froze them mid-explosion.

"I think the entrance has moved," Hook says.

I blink at him. *"Moved? How can the entrance just **move**? You can't just—"*

Hook gives me a flat look. *"You're in Wonderland, love. And **that's** the bit you're questioning?"*

I open my mouth to argue, but the words die before they leave my lips.

Because he's **right**.

None of this makes sense. And **that's the point**.

I keep staring up at the rocks, staring at them like I could **force** them to make sense. Because something is **pulling** at me—sharp, unexpected. A strange ache curling deep, twisting in my chest like something inside me is shifting.

For a moment, I can't breathe.

I've felt this before.

Not long ago, when Hook's hands were in my hair, when his mouth was on mine, when my heart pounded against my ribs and my body **betrayed me**.

It's the same sensation—like something tugging at me, **pulling** me toward something dangerous. Something I should run from.

But I don't.

I **can't**.

And I don't know if it's Wonderland pulling me in, or **him**.

My mind is a monster. One that twists things. Overthinks them. Turns them into something they're **not**.

"I can't decide if you're glaring at me or if you've got indigestion," Hook says.

I scowl at him, pressing my lips together because I don't know **what** I'm supposed to say.

"You kissed me," is what comes out.

"I did." That's **all** he says.

I stare at him, waiting for more. For **something**. But he just watches me with that infuriating, unreadable expression, while I'm sure I'm **broadcasting every thought across my face**.

Then—finally—he exhales, like he's **bored** with the entire conversation. *"I thought we were both going to die. Seemed like as good a time as any."*

My mouth falls open. *"That's your **explanation**?"*

He steps in, closing the distance, and **goddamn my body** if it doesn't react.

I'm like a **bloody schoolgirl** whose crush just looked at her.

"If you want," he murmurs, low and rough, *"we can do it again."*

I set a hand to his chest, fingers pressing into muscle, using every ounce of self-control **not** to give in to that idea. *"What if I don't want to?"*

A smirk tugs at the corner of his mouth, but his eyes—those damnable, knowing **eyes**—hold something sharper. *"Then you're lying."*

He moves in closer, just enough to **feel** him, his breath warm against my skin.

"My magic might be as pathetic as your excuses," he says, *"but I still have it. I still **feel**."*

He tilts his head, his lips almost grazing my ear. *"And I feel the way your heart stutters every time I'm close. And it's...adorable.*"*

I grit my teeth, refusing to let my pulse betray me. *"Maybe it's disgust."*

"Maybe..."

Chapter Sixty-Seven

HOOK

SHE'S SO bloody easy to push, to rile up. Every button right there for the pressing.

And I don't mean that in a bad way.

It's just who she is—wearing every thought, every flicker of emotion right on her face. No shields. No calculation. Just raw, unfiltered reaction. No idea how dangerous that makes her.

Infuriating.

Yet grounding.

I take a step back, putting distance between us. Pain rips through my leg, sharp and deep. I don't react. Won't react. Weakness is an opening, and I don't give those out freely.

But Alice watches me.

I feel her gaze even without looking. The way she sees too much, peeling back layers I never gave her permission to touch. I grit my teeth, throw up every damn wall I've built, because if I don't, she might actually see what's underneath.

Before her, before Wonderland, before all this mess, things were simple. Get in. Get the amulet. Get out. Fix Neverland.

Fix Sam.

For fuck's sake.

I clench my jaw, forcing my focus back where it belongs. On the amulet. On the mission. Not on the way she shifts closer when danger

threatens, or how her pulse jumps when I get too near.

Because when I say my magic is pathetic, I bloody well mean it.

I barely had a flicker left in that oubliette. Now? I'd be lucky to conjure a single spark. The absence gnaws at me, hollowing me out from the inside. Every second in this cursed place makes it worse.

Magic was fading in Neverland—everyone's was. That's why I came here. That's why this matters. But here, it's accelerating, Wonderland sucking the last scraps of power from my bones.

Is it because we're close? Because the Queen is here? Because the amulet is here, and she's using it against me, draining me the way she's draining the rest of my world?

It doesn't matter.

What matters is finding the gate. So I move away from Alice, putting space between us. Distance I need but don't want.

I need to focus.

Her voice pulls me back. "Do you have any idea where the gate might be?"

She's back on task. Good.

We don't need distractions.

I don't need distractions.

Though the way she bites her lower lip when she's thinking might be the death of me.

I exhale, dragging a hand through my hair. "No. For all we know, it's on the other damn side of this rock face. Or worse—" I gesture to the jagged cliffs ahead. "—it keeps moving."

Her brows pinch together. The expression shouldn't be endearing. It bloody well is. "I know this is Wonderland, but it still doesn't make sense." She puts a hand up, stopping me before I can throw in a comment. "I just... how do we find it? It could keep shifting around the rock, and we never catch up."

She shakes her head, rubbing her fingers over her temple. Frustration bleeds into every movement. "It's like the Wonderland I remember, only worse." A sharp breath leaves her. "What if we split up? You go one way; I'll go the other. One of us will find it."

"No." The word rips out before I can stop it, harsh and immediate.

She blinks at me. "No?"

"You'd get yourself into trouble, and then where would we be?" I say, covering up the instinct that surged at the thought of her wandering off alone. The need to keep her close that I refuse to examine.

Because apparently, not only is my magic fucked, but something else inside me cares—and I'm not supposed to.

I'm Captain goddamn Hook. I do not care.

Her lips press together, unimpressed. The sight shouldn't make my chest tight. "And you wouldn't?"

I snort. "I am the trouble."

She mutters something under her breath—too low to catch. Probably something rude. Definitely something I deserve.

We keep moving, walking along the rock face, searching. Her fingers graze the stone as we go, and I do not imagine those fingers on me. Not at all. My mind is completely on the job. Absolutely bloody focused.

"We came through here, didn't we?" She presses her fingertips into her temple like she's trying to force the memory out. Then she scowls at the path. "This is where we came when we left the teapot house. We ran this way." She turns back to the rock wall, to the sheer stone that definitely wasn't blocking our way before.

"Yeah." And then it clicks.

"The rock is a sundial," I say.

She stares at me, eyes bright with that spark of curiosity that keeps drawing me in. "A what?"

"When we saw it from the teapot house, it was one way. Now it's another. It's moving."

"I thought sundials didn't move."

"They don't," I say, watching her piece it together. "But I think that's what this is. Like a clock. It's turning."

Her expression sharpens, all focus now. The sight does things to my pulse I refuse to acknowledge. "Which means it's moving clockwise," she murmurs. "Which means the gate will move too, shifting with it." She turns, pointing back the way we just came. "So, if your theory is right, if we follow the movement, we'll reach the gate."

"My theory is right," I say, just to watch her bristle.

She shoots me a glare that could strip paint, but I don't wait for the retort I know is coming. I head off in the direction she pointed.

Pain flares in my leg as I walk, deep and relentless, riding up my thigh. I hate that it has me limping. Hate the weakness. Hate that she notices, her eyes tracking every uneven step.

We circle back around the rocks, heading toward the spot where we hid behind that pile of fallen stone. Where I kissed her. Where everything shifted.

It's Alice who stops first. "No. Freaking. Way." She moves ahead, striding forward like she's about to punch the air in frustration. Because there it is.

Right in front of us, lined up perfectly with where we were hiding.

The goddamn gate.

And why wouldn't it be?

That's exactly what this place does. Wonderland's own twisted sense of humour, throwing us right back where we started.

"This was definitely not here a minute ago," she mutters.

"Well, it's here now." I step up beside her, too close, and in one easy movement, slip the sword from her side. The brush of contact sends electricity through my fingers.

"Hey—" she snaps, reaching for it. The movement brings her closer, and for a moment, I forget why I wanted the sword in the first place.

I hold it out of reach, spinning it once, feeling the weight of it back in my grip. Trying to ignore how her proximity makes my skin buzz. "This," I say, flashing her a slow grin, "is for pirates, not princesses."

She rolls her eyes, but there's heat in her gaze that wasn't there before. "And here I was, thinking you'd finally got over that."

"Maybe. Now, are we going, or what?"

Chapter Sixty-Eight

ALICE

IF I COULD ROLL my eyes any louder, I would. I hate the way he calls me princess, and I hate even more the way something inside me warms to it. Bloody infuriating man.

I consider snatching the sword, but he's right—he is a pirate, and his blade work outclasses mine by leagues. My chances of wrestling it from him range from none to absolutely bloody none. Still, the image of pushing him into the overgrowth and watching him land on his arse holds a certain appeal.

The ground rumbles beneath our feet as I contemplate various ways to wound his pride. Hook's hand clamps around my arm, yanking me forward. "Quick, step into it. It's moving."

Thunder rolls under the earth, rocks shaking around us. The vibration concentrates beneath our feet, and he's right—the entrance shifts before our eyes. It slides right, moving far too fast for something made of stone. We move with it, the path glimmering strangely in the dim light. After a few feet, it jerks to a stop, nearly sending us sprawling.

The moment it stills, Hook attacks the brambles and vines blocking our path to the gates, his movements precise and controlled.

"Give me your knife," I say, holding out my hand before he can refuse. "I can help. You took the sword —don't make me stand here watching you do this. I can cut too."

He hesitates, jaw tight, then draws the knife from its sheath and hands it over. "Watch you don't sever a finger. The blade's sharp."

"Watch you don't cut the vines and nick your ego while you're at it," I retort, turning to tackle the mess of growth around the fencing.

A metal fence blocks our path, creating a bottleneck we can't skirt around. It's formed a tunnel, trapping us in until we clear it. Brilliant.

The knife Hook gave me proves its worth immediately. The blade cuts clean through the vines, but this task won't be quick. The growth is thick, woven together as if it's been here for ages. Perhaps it has.

But if the amulet waits inside—if my gut instinct proves right—then this isn't natural growth. It's a trap.

We're halfway through when I notice the state of my legs. Blood trickles down from dozens of scratches. The thorns catch and tear at what's left of my skirt, dragging crimson lines across my thighs. I look like I've gone ten rounds with an angry cat.

"It's moving again," Hook's voice cuts through my thoughts.

I grip the fence. "How do you know?"

"Did you not feel it?"

No, I hadn't. But then—

The path lurches.

Not the slow rumble from before. This motion hits sharp and violent. My hands slam against the railing, but the thorns tear into my palms. Instinct screams at me to let go, but—

The path jerks again.

Twists.

Pulls.

Wonderland's twisted version of a fairground ride throws us about. My foot shoots through a mass of vines, searching for stability. They snap under my weight, but the intact ones twist around my bare leg, thorns biting deep. I grab the rail again—all this in mere seconds—but Hook's already ahead, gripping the fence where he's cleared the path.

"Is this normal?" I grit out, pain sharpening my words.

"How the hell should I know?" Hook snaps. "I've not been here before."

The path bucks again, violence in its movement.

"I think it's trying to shake us off," I say through clenched teeth.

"No shit."

My grip on the rail weakens. Hook holds steady, but he's moving closer. He's just ahead, and I'm not sure how much longer I can hang on. The path throws us about like a demented mechanical bull, except this one has murder on its mind.

Hook positions himself behind me, one hand still on the rail. He squares his body to mine.

"It's spinning."

His free arm comes around me, other hand gripping the opposite rail, caging me in. Protecting me.

"Let go of the rail," he orders.

"I don't—"

"You can."

When I release my grip, the motion throws me back against him. My spine connects with his chest as his arms tighten, pressing me into the railing, anchoring us both. His hands are as torn as mine, blood marking his grip, but he doesn't falter. Doesn't let go.

For all his sharp words, all his claims that I don't matter—this moment tells a different story.

His breath warms my neck. His face hovers too close, cheek brushing mine as he speaks.

"Don't close your eyes." His voice stays low, steady. "It only makes it worse."

"I wasn't."

"You were."

Blood drips from his hand, staining the rail, but his grip remains iron-tight.

"Hook, you're bleeding. I can hold myself—"

"I've got this."

He presses closer, securing me more firmly against the railing. My breath catches at the contact.

Chaos erupts around us. The ground groans, stone grinding against stone. Then—

Everything stops.

The sudden stillness sends Hook crashing into my back, his body solid and warm against mine.

Neither of us moves. We wait, breath held, for the next attack.

A minute passes. Maybe two.

Finally, Hook releases me.

"We need to move. Quickly." His voice stays tight, low, breath still ghosting across my skin. "I don't think this is going to just let us be here."

"It's fighting against us." I exhale sharply, my hands stinging from the thorns. My body remembers his hold, the pressure of him against me.

"Yes." No hesitation. "Which means whatever's up there, the Queen doesn't want us to reach. Which is exactly why we should."

He returns to the vines, sword flashing as he cuts through them with precise, brutal strokes. But I stay still. Taking in our surroundings.

We're not on our previous path. This isn't the rocky stretch where we hid, nor the twisted route to the house.

We stand at the mouth of a forest.

Trees rise like black spires, their limbs twisted and gnarled, blocking out any hint of sky. No moonlight filters through the canopy. No stars peek between branches. Just darkness, endless and suffocating, stretching deeper than sight allows.

The air presses against us, thick and alive. No sound breaks the silence. No wind stirs the leaves. No creatures rustle in the shadows.

A forest should live. Should breathe. This one doesn't.

This one waits.

The trees lean inward, branches forming shapes that turn my stomach. The ground beneath gleams wet with something that reeks of rot and decay. And further in—just beyond where light reaches—something else lurks.

A sensation crawls across my skin.

Watching eyes in the dark.

I force myself forward, stepping beside Hook. "This doesn't feel like a forest."

He doesn't pause his assault on the vines, but tension coils through his shoulders. "That's because it isn't."

"Then what is it?"

He strikes through another vine before answering, the growth curling back from his blade like it knows to retreat.

The gate looms before us, massive and wrong. Black iron drinks in what little light reaches this cursed place. The bars twist into jagged spires, crafted without symmetry or grace—just brutal, snarling metal that screams warning.

Wicked spikes jut from the top, irregular and waiting. Some curve inward like talons, others reach out to catch any fool brave enough to climb. They glisten with something too thick to be water. The metallic scent in the air isn't just rust—it's something older; something that makes bile rise in my throat.

Dark strands stretch between the bars like sinew, barely visible but enough to make my skin crawl. This isn't a normal gate. Not just metal and mechanisms—it pulses with life.

The path winds upward beyond it, steep and unforgiving. We can see our destination now. That should bring relief. It doesn't. Because this gate wasn't built just to keep things out.

Hook reaches around me, his chest pressing briefly against my back as he grabs the handle and pulls. Nothing gives. No shift of hidden locks. Just cold, dead metal.

"It's locked?"

He nods, already crouching to clear away debris—leaves and twigs trapped here for God knows how long. Then he stills, pressing his forehead against the thickest bar. His voice comes out low, resigned.

"It needs a damn key."

I trace the edges of the keyhole beneath his fingers. But it's wrong. Not a neat, machined slot waiting for its match. The shape tears jagged and uneven through the metal, more like something was ripped out than designed to fit.

My stomach knots. Does this place ever give us a bloody break?

I exhale slowly, mind racing for solutions. But before I can think, a sound freezes my blood. A low, rolling growl.

I go still.

So does Hook.

We turn together, eyes locking onto the darkness between the trees.

Eyes stare back.

Bright. Slitted. Yellow. Dozens of them.

Not one Bandersnatch.

A pack.

Chapter Sixty-Nine

HOOK

"OH, for the love of god. Does this place ever fucking give up?"

I turn, sword in hand, blood hammering through my veins. My pulse pounds a warning I'm trying desperately to ignore.

Of course. Of bloody fucking course.

The shadows peel back, revealing them. Bandersnatches. Not one, not two, but a whole bloody pack. They stand motionless, waiting, their silence more unsettling than any snarl. Things with teeth that size shouldn't move so quietly. We're trapped between them and the locked gate, with nothing but steel and stupidity between us and death.

A growl ripples through the pack, deep enough to shake the ground beneath my boots. My muscles coil tight as my grip locks around the sword's hilt. One steps forward, and I recognise it immediately—blood-slicked fur, torn-up scars.

Not just a Bandersnatch. The Bandersnatch.

Alice moves beside me. I feel her shift before I see it, the warmth of her too close, too distracting even now.

I don't step in front of her. What's the bloody point? They'd tear through me and still get to her. One nearly killed us both. An entire pack?

This is Wonderland stacking the deck, fixing the game, dealing us a hand we can't possibly win.

The largest prowls forward, massive and deliberate. Its form flickers between solid and shadow, dark liquid dripping from fangs longer than my

forearm. But it isn't attacking. Isn't rushing us with blind violence.

It's watching me.

Not with hunger. Not with mindless malice.

No. I know violence. I've seen it in men's eyes before. Cold. Calculated. The kind of hatred that doesn't burn—it freezes, deep and sharp.

But this? There's something else here. Something behind those glowing eyes that turns my blood cold.

Awareness.

I tip my chin, rolling my shoulders. "Are we really doing this again?"

Alice stirs beside me, her breath catching—but her voice stays steady. Too steady.

"Hook."

I feel her move before I see it. Her hand brushes mine—not for comfort, not for reassurance.

For my sword.

I react instantly, fingers flexing, ready to stop her. To pull her back, to shove her behind me where she bloody well belongs—

She shakes me off. Like I'm nothing. Like I never mattered at all.

My teeth grind together, but I don't stop her. I should. I bloody well should. Every instinct screams at me to keep the blade, to keep myself between her and whatever fresh hell we're about to face.

But something deeper, something I don't have a name for, whispers that this is exactly how it's meant to be.

Alice doesn't hesitate. Doesn't second-guess. She doesn't even spare me a glance.

"We mean you no harm," she says, stepping forward. Unarmed. Mad. Brilliant. Terrifying.

I tighten my grip on the sword. Maybe she believes this will work. Maybe she thinks there's another way out of this mess.

I don't.

I don't believe in fate. I don't believe in mercy.

I believe in steel.

We might be outnumbered. This might be certain death.

But if we go down, we go down fighting.

I move to step with her, to close the distance, to do something, but she throws out an arm. Her palm presses against my chest without even

turning her head. A silent *stay back*.

I don't like it. I don't trust it.

But I don't move.

The lead Bandersnatch—the one I ran through with my sword—doesn't snarl. Doesn't bare its fangs.

Instead, it takes another step forward. Slow. Measured. Deliberate.

Alice hesitates. A fraction of a second. Then she steps forward too.

My grip tightens until my knuckles go white. She shouldn't be doing this. I should be stopping her.

But I don't.

The Bandersnatch lowers its head, a low, rolling growl vibrating through its chest.

And it isn't a threat.

Not a warning.

A test.

My heart slams against my ribs as Alice lifts her hand.

Not reaching. Not touching. Just offering.

The Bandersnatch's nostrils flare. Its growl shifts, transforms into something else entirely.

And then its glowing yellow eyes meet hers.

The world stops breathing.

It approaches her hand, taking small, careful sniffs. The rest of the pack flanks it, and I know—one wrong move, one mistimed breath, and we're both dead.

"Alice," it says.

We freeze. Not that we were moving before, but a different kind of stillness snaps over us. Alice gasps. I stare at the beast, my mind refusing to process what just happened.

It spoke.

The creature raises its head, drawing itself to full height. The smoke around it churns, whooshing in and out with each breath. The bloody thing grows with each exhale until it towers over her.

"You speak?" Alice's voice barely trembles.

Its deep yellow eyes lock onto hers. Something changes in that gaze—knowledge, awareness, as if whatever shield it wore before has dropped away.

"You stand at the gates of the sacred hall of memories," it intones, its voice deep enough to vibrate in my chest. "You stand at the threshold, child of two worlds. You do not know it yet, but you are remembered here."

Chapter Seventy

ALICE

No. Freaking. Way.

The Bandersnatch sniffs at my hand—short, sharp sniffs—cautious, like a dog trying to decide if I’m something to be wary of or just another part of the scenery.

The others flank its sides, their glowing eyes locked on me, watching. Waiting.

Behind me, Hook is so still he might as well be carved from stone. But I feel him—coiled tight, every muscle wound like a spring ready to snap. He’s waiting too. Because we both know—one wrong move, and we’re completely and utterly screwed.

“Alice...”

I freeze.

Not that I was moving before, but now... now everything stops. The world locks into place, like something vast and unseen just took a breath and held it. My own breath catches, and beside me, Hook goes rigid.

It spoke.

The Bandersnatch lifts its head, rising—not just in size, but in presence. The smoke coiling around its body shifts, pulling in and out like breath, making a low, wheezing sound that sends a ripple of cold across my skin.

It grows taller with every exhale, stretching impossibly high until I have to crane my neck just to keep eye contact. But I don’t back down. I

don't step back.

"You speak."

My voice barely sounds like my own. My pulse pounds in my throat, and I can't tell if it's from fear or something else—something deeper, something older.

The Bandersnatch's golden eyes don't leave mine. They blink—slow, deliberate, assessing—and something inside them shifts. Before, it looked like an animal. Instinctive. Dangerous. Unknowable.

Now...

I suck in a breath.

The Bandersnatch tilts its head.

"You stand at the gates of the Sacred Hall of Memories. You stand at the threshold, child of two worlds. You do not know it yet, but you are remembered here."

A pause. A moment for the words to settle, to wrap around me, to pull at something inside me I don't understand. I don't know what they mean. But they mean something.

"Wonderland has always known you. It has waited for you, through the unravelling of time, through the decay of its bones. It bends, it shifts, it twists upon itself—but you? You remain. The girl who left. The girl who forgot. The girl who was never meant to be forgotten."

A breath, slow and deliberate, those golden eyes pinning me in place.

"I came here by accident," I manage. "When I was a child, I—"

"You do not remember the old ways, the first paths, the doors that were sealed long before your birth. But they remember you."

The Bandersnatch's voice rumbles through me like thunder, deep and knowing.

"It was not an accident. They whisper your name in the dark, in the roots of the earth, in the veins of this land that writhes under the Queen's hand."

I shake my head, my heart hammering so hard it might break through my ribs.

"You are more than what you believe. More than flesh. More than memory. You are the hinge upon which Wonderland turns, and yet, you do not see it."

I swallow hard.

"You are Alice."

A pause.

"And you have come home."

The words slam into me like a wave, dragging me under, tumbling me in a riptide of something I don't want to feel. My pulse races with every syllable, every meaning behind them. "This is not my world," I say, but the words feel weak. Hollow. Like I don't even believe them myself.

"When I was a child, I—"

The ground lurches beneath me.

The whole world tilts.

I gasp, grabbing the railing as my stomach flips. Hook curses beside me, bracing himself against the shifting ground. But there's nothing to react to—just the land itself, moving.

"Tell it to stop," it commands.

I blink at it, heart still slamming against my ribs. "What?"

"Tell it to stop." Its voice is deeper now, edged with something sharp, something expectant. "You have the power. The land listens to you."

"I—" The path bucks, twisting underfoot, and I grip the railing like a lifeline. "I can't. I don't—"

"Learn," the Bandersnatch snarls.

My breath hitches. The path shudders, lurching sideways, and I dig my heels in, fighting to stay upright.

"I don't know how."

The Bandersnatch steps closer, its golden eyes burning.

"You do know. You always know."

The world jerks violently. The tremor beneath us is like a heartbeat out of rhythm, chaotic and wrong. I squeeze my eyes shut against the dizzying motion.

"You stand in a land that bends to your very existence, and you are losing to it. You refuse who you are. That is your weakness. You let doubt sink into your bones, let it rot you from the inside. Wonderland knows you, and yet you deny it. That is why you fail. You cower like a frightened child."

My eyes snap open.

"I am not afraid."

That has never been it. I was not afraid as a child. Never. And I am not afraid now.

Hook moves beside me. "Alice—"

The Bandersnatch snarls at him. "Now is not your time."

The world shakes again, and when I look at the Bandersnatch, twin yellow eyes bore into mine. They flare. I am standing before them all—the Bandersnatches, but not just them. Hook, too.

"If the path moves, you fail."

I swallow hard, rip my hand from the railing, and throw it into the air, into the chaos, into the power pressing in on all sides.

I feel it.

I feel it from the place above, from the creatures in front of me, from everything around me. It hums. It sings. Something low and rumbling.

But I don't know what I'm doing.

I don't know how to do what they need.

But I do it anyway.

I try.

The Bandersnatch nods, and all I can do is breathe—feel the vibrations in the air.

The air shifts.

Something answers.

The tremors falter—just for a fraction of a second—like the path itself is waiting.

"Enough," I say. My voice shakes, but it's strong.

Nothing happens.

Hook is there. He steps into me. So close. So god damn close, and I ...

"Say it like you mean it."

I grit my teeth, fingers curling into fists.

Something unfurls inside me, hot and alive. It rushes up my spine, blooming outward, twisting through my chest like the vines we just cut away.

I stare down at the shifting path, at the cracks forming in the dirt, at the way the world sways like something caught in an unseen tide.

Not this time.

"Enough," I say again, and this time, it's not a plea.

It's a command.

The moment stretches—silent, waiting—then slams into place.

My body hums, every nerve singing, my skin burning with a power I don't understand.

"Wonderland is listening," the Bandersnatch murmurs.

"Stop."

The path stills.

And just like that—my knees give out.

Chapter Seventy-One

HOOK

I CATCH her before she hits the ground.

Her body crumples the moment the path stills, and I move on pure instinct—one stride closing the space between us. My arms lock around her waist, pulling her back against my chest, steadying us both.

She doesn't speak. Doesn't make a sound. Just draws in a sharp breath, her head falling back against my shoulder.

But her skin—fucking hell.

Power radiates from her, not fever but something else entirely. My fingers catch her wrist, finding her pulse. It hammers against my touch but stays strong. Steady. Another inconvenient reminder she's still very much alive and pressed against me.

She's breathing too. Quick and rough, but she's breathing. Each exhale sends warmth across my collarbone. Distracting.

I look past her to the Bandersnatch, its golden eyes fixed on her form. Not on me. Not on the threat I pose.

On her.

It bows. A gesture of respect I've never seen from creatures such as these.

"You begin to understand," it rumbles, the words vibrating through my chest where Alice presses against me. "But you have far to go."

Alice stirs in my arms, and my grip tightens instinctively. I shouldn't want to hold her closer. Shouldn't feel this need to protect. Shouldn't

notice how perfectly she fits against me.

But I do. Every damn time.

"Easy," I murmur, my lips brushing her ear.

She doesn't fight me. Doesn't pull away. Doesn't do any of the hundred things I'd expect from her stubborn spirit.

Instead, she sinks deeper into my hold, her breath shaking. Her fingers curl around my forearm, nails digging in.

"My legs," she whispers. "They won't—"

"I've got you."

The words slip out before I can stop them. Three simple words that mean far too much.

I shouldn't say it. Shouldn't mean it.

But bloody hell, I do.

Chapter Seventy-Two

ALICE

I STEADY MY BREATH, trying to ignore how my skin still hums from whatever just happened—whatever I just did. I manage to stand on my own, close to Hok, but he isn't holding me. I still don't feel steady.

My gaze lifts to the path beyond the gate, the incline sharp, winding up, almost unseen.

The Hall of Memories. That's what that place is? That's what the beast said.

"We need to get up there," I finally say, forcing the words out through the lingering haze in my head. "We need to get through the gate and to that path. But it's locked."

"Then unlock it," the Bandersnatch says flatly, as if I hadn't thought of that brilliant solution myself.

I let out a breath. "We can't. We don't have the key."

Hook drags a hand down his face. "It's locked," he says. "Obviously, it's got some kind of strange—" He stops, eyes narrowing at the iron bars. "Shape to it, not like a normal keyhole, but still working just the same."

"And we can't climb over," I say as my gaze follows his and rests on the jagged twisting gap where the keyhole should be. Not circular, not even remotely key-shaped. It's more like—

"Is that not the Vorpall Sword you hold in your hand?" the Bandersnatch asks, fixing its gaze on Hook.

Hook's grip tightens on the hilt. "It's a sword. I mean—it was a stick, but then Alice..." He trails off, and for the first time since I've known him, he stumbles over his words. His brows pull together. His fingers shift against the hilt, like he's only just now really looking at it. "Alice turned my spear into the sword," he says, more to himself than anyone else. His thumb drags over the edge, thoughtful, calculating. His expression sharpens, like something clicking into place. "This is the key?"

The Bandersnatch doesn't answer. Just stares.

Hook exhales, slow and sharp, rolling his shoulders. "You want me to stick the sword in the lock and hope something happens? It doesn't make sense. It doesn't even fit the shape."

The Bandersnatch tilts its head, that eerie almost-knowing smile curling its lips. "Is that not the way you both do things? Stab first and hope later?"

I swallow. The hum inside me grows stronger.

Steel.

The Vorpall Sword.

Of course. It was never just a weapon. I don't even know why the name feels familiar to me. The last time I was here, I never had the sword, never had a single weapon, but that sword feels right. Maybe that's why I wanted to hold onto it.

Hook steps toward the gate, staring at the lock for a long moment. Thinking, calculating, like he's solving some unseen puzzle.

Then, he lifts the sword, gripping the hilt firmly, and presses the tip into the jagged opening.

I hold my breath.

Bite my lip.

Every muscle in my body locks as I wait—wait for the gate to just swing open and let us in.

But nothing happens.

The metal remains cold and unyielding.

A stillness settles, stretching too long, too thick, pressing in on my skin until I can barely breathe.

The Bandersnatches shift, all of them circling. They're restless.

Something in my chest clenches.

"It's not right," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. "You're doing it wrong."

Hook growls, pulling the sword back. "Well, by all means, you do it then."

The Bandersnatch shakes its massive head. "I have no idea why the world was put into the hands of two humans," it mutters. "You have one job. Just one. Save Wonderland, and you both still manage to be useless."

Hook glares at it. "You do realise what you just said, right? Save a whole world."

The Bandersnatch huffs. "It is her destiny."

I try not to listen to that, because one, I tell myself I don't believe it, and two... I know I don't believe it, and three, I am no one's destiny. Hell, I can't even be my own destiny, it seems, but that's another problem for another day, and one that's not here because my head just can't think of what's going on back home.

"The sword is the key," I say slowly, "but not just the sword."

Hook raises an eyebrow. "More riddles?"

I ignore him, stepping forward, lifting my hand to the sword. Hook lets me take it, but I can't read the relent in his face. I let my fingers brush over his where they grip the hilt, a spark of something between us. His fingers twitch beneath mine, but he doesn't pull away.

"The sword isn't the key," I murmur. "It's me."

And before Hook can say anything, before doubt can slip between my ribs and take root, I take the sword from him. I lift it to the gate, but it isn't the tip I use, not the blade at all, but the ball at the hilt.

I push.

Placing the ball over the opening at the lock, but it doesn't do anything. No, not on its own. "I'm the key," I say.

Magic surges through me, down into the steel, lighting it up from the inside. The sword responds. Its glow pushes outward, burning through the gaps and pushing the ball of the hilt into the lock. The gate seems to swallow it whole, and I swear the black iron ripples in a way that makes me question my own eyes.

I turn the sword, using the hilt as the key.

And with a thunderous groan, the gate shifts.

And it opens.

Chapter Seventy-Three

HOOK

"BLOODY FUCKING HELL."

That's all I manage to spit out as the gate shrieks open. The iron moans and groans like it's coming alive, and she—she just unlocks it like it's nothing.

Is this what the mirror meant by her being the key? The evidence suggests it, and even the Bandersnatch seems to confirm it. I could leave her here now. This is my problem, my mission to get the amulet. I could just get up there, get it, come down, get her home like I promised, and get back to Neverland.

But it feels too easy. After all we've gone through to get here, simply seeing that she's the key to open the gate?

I don't buy it. Nothing is ever that easy.

Power shimmers beneath her skin, coursing over her, making her glow from the inside. She's all ice and fire, sharp angles and soft words, grace and fucking violence. And I can't do a damn thing but stare.

She's incandescent.

A goddamn star, burning right in front of me, and I'm going to burn with her.

"Are you coming?" she asks.

"Someone has to keep you from getting killed."

The steep incline looms before us. My thigh aches at the mere thought, but Captain Hook doesn't back down so easily. No, fuck that. I'm getting to

the top of this hill if it kills me.

"We just go up?" I ask the Bandersnatch.

"You just go up. What you seek is in there."

"The amulet?"

The creature pauses. "What you seek."

A smaller Bandersnatch steps forward—female, by her voice—and speaks:

"Lost not in time, but a tale untold,

A stolen seat, a fate grown cold.

Where power was taken and shadows grew,

The truth is locked in what she knew.

To open the past, you must walk through your own,

For mirrors reflect what the mind has shown.

Face what was, unravel the thread—

Only then shall the path be read."

More bloody riddles. I want to ignore it, but my mind sticks on part of it: To open the past you must walk through your own. I think of the field, of Sam, and I don't want to walk that past. Don't want to see it.

"Is it so hard to just say 'go up the path, open the door, take the first left, and the amulet's on the top shelf next to the biscuit tin'? Boom, world saved, we all go home."

They all stare at me, blinking.

"We can't give you answers," the female says. "Our words are bound, and if they were to spill from our lips, we could become dust."

Alice steps in. "The Queen has made it so you can't speak? Like Sophia?"

"The Queen holds onto threads with loose hands, but she can stitch in places she is not meant to."

"Fine," I say. "We'll find our own way." I step onto the path, Alice beside me, but the Bandersnatches remain at the edge. "Are any of you coming with us?"

"We can't cross the path. It is not our place. We are tied to this world and the land forbids it. You are not."

"But you said Alice is of this world too." I pointedly look at her feet, already over the threshold.

"You already know the answer to your question, pirate," the main Bandersnatch says in his deep, gruff voice. "Go now. Do what you are

meant for." He glances up at the sky, where the sun sets in deep reds. "This will be the last sunset here. Make it count."

Chapter Seventy-Four

ALICE

THE BANDERSNATCHES DON'T FOLLOW us up the path.

They stay behind, watching. There must be six of them, standing in formation like sentinels, their eyes burning in the dim light.

I glance back occasionally as we climb, half-expecting them to charge after us, but they never do. They just watch. Silent.

By the time my calves are screaming and my shins feel like they've splintered in half, the Bandersnatches have disappeared from view. So has the gate. So has the path behind us.

Only the climb remains.

The Hall of Memories looms ahead, sharper with every step. Its structure juts outward at odd angles, glimmering under the eerie light. From a distance, it looked magical. From here, it looks dangerous.

I suck in a breath. "How's your thigh?" I ask Hook, side-eyeing him as I press a hand to my own leg.

He doesn't seem to be struggling as much as I am, which is infuriating.

He's injured. He was stabbed. And yet, here I am, huffing like a dying animal while he just keeps walking.

I stop for a second, hands on my knees, trying to get some air into my lungs. *Oh. My. God.* This incline is vicious.

For someone who runs four times a week, you'd think I wouldn't feel like my legs are about to detach from my body and roll back down the hill

without me. But this? This path is not natural. If it were any steeper, we'd need a ladder.

Winter must turn this place into a death trap. The ice alone would send you sliding straight back to the gate—if Wonderland didn't just swallow you whole first.

Hook finally slows, shifting his weight, his hand tightening on his sword. "It's fine. As long as I keep walking."

But there's strain in his voice. He hides it well, but I hear it. I see it. The way his jaw tightens. The way sweat gathers at his hairline, dampening the strands curling at his temple.

Good. At least I'm not the only one suffering.

I straighten, forcing myself to keep moving. "What do you think we'll find when we get up there?" I ask, dragging my gaze back to the glittering monstrosity ahead.

Hook glances at me—quick, sharp. There's definitely pain in his face. That ridiculously attractive face I should not be looking at.

Especially not at his mouth.

Not at those lips.

Nope. Absolutely not.

He exhales, gaze flicking back to the climb ahead. "I think whatever's up there is going to drive us insane."

The path narrows as we climb, forcing us closer together. What started as enough space for three now barely fits two, and my arm keeps brushing his. Stone walls rise on either side, slick grey-brown brick glistening with moisture. Vines pierce through cracks, reaching upward like desperate fingers stretching toward freedom.

We walk.

"How do you think time works here?" I keep my voice low, my eyes fixed ahead, but I need something to distract me. If not, I'm giving up and admitting defeat. "If you open the portal and I get back home... will it be the same moment I left?" The last time, it felt like weeks passed here. Maybe more. A lifetime compressed into dreams.

The Alice who crawled out of that rabbit hole wasn't the same one who fell in. And I know, with bone-deep certainty, that whoever walks out of Wonderland this time won't be the same either.

"Do you think time moves differently in all the worlds?" I glance at him. "In Neverland, nobody ages. That's what the stories say. The children

stay children forever. Peter Pan never grows up." I hesitate before adding, "Apart from Captain Hook. Who ages slowly."

That stops him. His stride falters, scowl darkening.

"The Hollowlanders stories are wrong." His voice cuts sharp.

"Oh?"

His jaw tightens. Something flickers across his face—bitter, annoyed.

"I do not—" He stops himself. "I did not age in Neverland."

"But you're an adult."

"Yes." He looks away, exhaling hard. "I'm very aware of that."

I frown. "But Neverland is filled with children."

A harsh sound catches in his throat. "Yes. Children and pixies."

The word 'pixies' twists his expression. He mutters something too low to catch.

I chew my lip, thinking. "My grandmother used to tell me about Neverland. About Wendy and Peter."

His scoff turns razor-sharp. "Do not mention that boy to me."

"So he's real?"

Hook's expression hardens, his eyes meeting mine with something dark and unreadable. "Sadly."

I cock a brow. "But he's not the sweet little boy from the stories?"

A laugh without warmth. "No. He is most certainly not." His fingers brush the Vorpall Sword's hilt.

"My gran used to say Neverland was a fairy tale for children who'd passed away."

Hook's silence weighs between us.

"She said Peter wasn't just a lost boy," I press on, "but something else. A ferryman. Like the Grim Reaper, but for children. He'd come in the night, not to steal them away—but to guide them. To a world made just for them."

Hook keeps walking, face unreadable.

"There was a girl who lived down my street. A year older than me. We never played together—she wasn't allowed outside much. Used crutches. Sometimes I'd see her at school, but then... one day she just stopped coming."

Our footsteps crunch against the path.

"They told us she died in her sleep."

Still nothing from Hook.

"I asked my gran where she'd gone. If God had taken her.. She said no. Peter had taken her. She'd gone to Neverland, where she could be a child forever. Where she'd never be sick again."

Hook finally exhales—a sound I can't decipher. Not amusement. Not irritation. Something else entirely.

"Is Neverland really filled with spirits of children from my world?"

He contemplates this for a long moment before speaking. "Neverland holds as much madness as this place. But yes. It's filled with children."

"And my gran was right?"

His gaze flicks to mine. "About what?"

"About Peter. About when he appears in the stories—when he flies into Wendy's room." I swallow hard. "She always said that was the moment Wendy died."

Hook's lips press into a hard line. "Yes."

"Then that means..." I release a shaky breath. "Lizzie is there. The girl from my street. She's in Neverland." I'm not even sure why it matters so much. I'm an adult now. I know what death is. I don't need my Gran's placating stories, but still. "Do you think she's happy?"

"She is not sick," he says quietly.

I nod slowly, but then another thought strikes cold through my chest.

I turn to him, pulse stuttering. "But that doesn't explain why you're there. You're an adult. You aren't a child. You should have—"

The thought stops me mid-step.

My breath catches as I really look at him. At the shadows in his eyes.

"Hook," I say carefully, "are you dead?"

His expression doesn't change.

"Did you die?"

Finally, he speaks. "You ask too many questions, love."

His voice comes rough. Quiet.

And he gives me no answer.

Chapter Seventy-Five

ALICE

HOOK DOESN'T ANSWER my question.

He keeps walking, boots steady on the uneven stone, shoulders squared. The path winds up, sharp and endless, the silence pressing between us. I hold my breath, waiting, but he doesn't look at me.

Maybe I shouldn't have asked.

The thought lingers, unwelcome. But no—he didn't deny it, didn't scoff or roll his eyes. He just kept walking.

My legs burn, but I refuse to stop. Not when he hasn't. Not when he seems unaffected by all of this—by the exhaustion, by the climb, by the question I just threw at him.

Minutes pass. The Hall of Memories looms ahead, jagged and unnatural. Its glow shifts and fractures, as if the building itself can't decide whether it exists.

Still, Hook says nothing.

The silence is worse than his usual sharp remarks, so I break it. "Do you have a ship?" The words come out too quick. "In Neverland, I mean."

His head tilts slightly, but he doesn't stop. "Obviously."

I frown.

His mouth twitches, barely a movement. "The Jolly Roger."

The name should sound grand, but the way he says it is different—not boastful. Almost reluctant.

"And you sail the seas of Neverland... to do what?"

“To be far away from people who ask too many questions.” His eyes flick to mine, and there’s a heat there, a darkness that sends a shiver down my spine.

I snort, but it’s breathless. “So, you’re just out there alone, glaring at the sea?”

He quickens his pace. “Something like that.”

I move ahead of him, stepping into his path. He stops just short of colliding with me, eyes darkening. His gaze drops to my mouth, just for a second, before snapping back up to meet mine. My heart pounds in my chest, a wild, reckless rhythm.

“And what about your name?” I press, my voice barely above a whisper. “Why Hook?”

His fingers flex at his side before curling into a fist. “Why do you care, Alice?” My name on his lips is a low growl, intimate and dangerous.

“I’m making conversation.”

A muscle flickers in his jaw. “Not anymore,” he says, voice tight.

“Anymore?”

His patience frays, his breath sharp and uneven. He steps closer, his voice a low rumble that I feel in my bones. “Did anyone ever tell you, you talk too much? Ask too much?”

Before I can react, he moves—fast. His hand presses against my shoulder, backing me up against the stone wall. Not hard. Not rough. But deliberate. Possessive. His body is close, so close I can feel his heartbeat, can see the flecks of gold in his dark eyes. The heat from him is overwhelming, setting my skin on fire.

I don’t move. I can’t. I’m trapped in his gaze, in the raw, primal connection that’s pulsing between us. His hand lingers on my shoulder, thumb brushing against my collarbone, sending sparks of electricity through me.

My pulse stutters.

But I’m not afraid of him. “Fine. I get it. You don’t want to talk about it.”

For a moment, he just watches me, something unreadable tightening his features. Then, voice lower now, rougher, he says, “No. I don’t.”

Something curls through my chest. Not irritation. Not fear. Something else entirely.

He turns from me first, stepping away like none of it happened. The moment snaps, the air settling between us, though my skin still burns where he touched me.

I exhale, slow and steady, and fall back in step beside him as the Hall of Memories rises before us. Sharp, jagged spires reach impossibly high, shimmering like glass caught between dimensions. Up close, the glow isn't soft or warm—it's fractured, unstable, as if light itself struggles to exist here.

My stomach clenches.

"We're here," I breathe.

"Finally."

We step onto flat ground—smooth marble replacing the rough path. White stone walls tower around us, ancient and imposing.

"Do we just... walk up to the door?"

Hook takes a step forward, his boots crunching against the marble.
"Only one way to find out."

Chapter Seventy-Six

HOOK

I GRIP THE SWORD STEADY, my fingers tight around the hilt, but my eyes scan the courtyard. This is too perfect, too still. Too fucking quiet. I don't like it. There's something... I don't know. Even Alice stands beside me almost still, her posture about as tense as mine.

"Where are the guards? Where's the bloody cavalry?" I narrow my eyes, making sure to look at every corner, every crack and crevice, because this does not feel right. Not at all.

I don't even take a step.

We're standing at what I can only describe as a grand courtyard with perfectly manicured hedges, and blindingly white marble underfoot. Crystal clear fountains flank us. It's like stepping into a warm summer's day at a royal palace and everyone left.

The building ahead of us is gleaming and pristine. It has wide steps leading up to the large ornately carved doors. And that's fine. This is all so nice.

But where are the guards? The fact that there isn't a single soul up here...

"This place feels... wrong."

I tap the ground in front of us with the tip of the sword, half expecting it to give way like the ground did in the maze and drop us down into the oubliette. That's what I'd do if this was my palace. "The Queen went through all that trouble to stop us getting up here? The bandersnatches, the

moving rock, even the gate and we get here and there's nothing?" I turn around to look behind us. "I don't buy it. This doesn't make one fuck of sense."

"Maybe she's confident no one would get up here," Alice says. Though she herself doesn't step over the threshold. "Maybe she thinks she didn't need guards?"

"Nah. That isn't it. Queen Paranoid down there. There's no way she's leaving this place open like this. She could have an entire army of bandersnatches down there and this place would still be locked right up." I dare to take a step forward, but I'm listening, and watching for something. Something is going to jump. The place is too quiet and I sure as hell do not trust it. She's the kind of cruel woman that would have us step out, feel safe and then a blade would swoop down and something somewhere would ring out, 'off with their heads!'

We creep out when my first and second step doesn't get us killed.

Alice is just behind me. "The air feels cold." She rubs at her arms. "Do you feel that?"

I nod. "Cold like her heart."

"Like someone filled this place with ice. And it's too quiet. It isn't just quiet like it's silent, but it's quiet quiet." She taps her shoe on the ground, and she's right. There's no echo from the movement, no tapping.

I do the same with the sword, stabbing it down, and the sound is dull. Lost. I don't know what that means.

We make our way towards the doors. And they're massive. I mean, fucking huge, covered in twisting shifting patterns that seem almost alive. In the centre of both doors are carved hearts and where the doors meet, is another. On either side of the top of the steps instead of there being pillars, there are two card-shaped statues, carved out like an almost S shape, playing cards made of stone. Cards of the hearts deck. Each with a heart-shaped head. They have their eyes closed, but that doesn't mean I take my eyes off them.

As we reach the bottom of the stairs, Alice and I exchange a look, but we don't say what we're thinking because I'm pretty sure it's the same thing. We made it across the courtyard, but this... we step. What if an alarm goes off, what if when our feet touch the flat stone something happens? I've seen enough of the things Hollowlanders call movies in my

time (movie nights at pixie bay). I hate fucking pixies, but I was desperate for supplies.

"Do you feel that?" she says, her hand on her chest, over her heart. She's looking up at the doors. She takes a gasp. "It feels like something's pulling at me. Calling to me. I..."

I feel the opposite. Every instinct in me is screaming at me to turn back. I push against it. I have to. I don't have it in me to come this far and back down, because my amulet is in there. I'm sure as I am of anything. But it's the playing card pillars I have my eyes on. I stare at the one on my side as we walk up the steps, and I swear it's moving with us, moving its head. I grip the sword ready. Keeping my eyes on their spires. One move, and I'll take their fucking heads off.

When we reach the top, I wave a hand in front of its face, then poke it with my sword. I have to be sure. Nothing happens.

"Hook."

"I'm checking." I stab at it, jabbing it with the tip of the blade, but the thing's smooth, impervious to my sword. It doesn't mean it doesn't have a weakness, though.

Alice goes to the doors and checks the handles, rattling them. "Locked," she says.

But I still have my eyes on this fucker. "Would it be anything else?"

Alice runs her delicate hands over the intricate surface, and I pretend not to want to know what that feels like. Now is not the time for my brain to kick in. She's feeling for a lock, a keyhole, but there's nothing. I can see that without even examining the door.

"Here, let me try this." I pull my small knife out and hand her the sword for a moment, then I slide the blade into the slight gap between the two doors, sliding it down and expecting it to make contact with the lock mechanism where the handles are, but my knife slips lower. The catch is near the bottom, which makes no sodding sense, but okay, if this is the way it's been built, then so be it. I wriggle my knife, trying to get the blade right in, trying to get it to feel something.

"It's not working," she says.

"It will. I just..." I reach for the handle, to see if I can get the lock to give at all, but there's not a damn thing to it. I press my ear to the marble and when Alice goes to speak, I put my hand up to silence her. I need to feel my way around the lock. There isn't any lock or bolt that has kept

Captain Hook out and this one isn't about to beat me. I have to almost force the knife in, though, and then... "Ah, hell." The blade snaps. Right at the hilt, right at the edge, and the metal clangs to the ground. "For the love of--"

"Only the past shall pass."

Both Alice and I stop at that, at the words, at the voice, at each other. It was an echo between my ears, not a sound outside, but I... "Did you hear that?"

"Only the past shall pass?"

I rise from where I am beside the latch on the door and narrow my eyes. The statue moved, I'm damn well sure of it. I knew they did. The card at my side of the steps has its head turned towards us more than the one on Alice's side. "The cards." I grab the sword from Alice and walk right up to the card and stand so we're eye to eye, even if its are closed. "You spoke. What did you say?"

Nothing. It doesn't move, doesn't speak. I raise the sword and point it at the statue's chin, pitching it in a little. If this were human and made of flesh, I'd have nicked the skin. "Open your eyes and look at me before I run you through."

"It's just a statue," Alice says and I feel her presence close behind me. I always feel her. When she felt the pull inside, I feel the pull to her. I don't like that. Because as I look at this statue, and she comes close, she gets close to the statue on her side and it makes me try to keep an eye out there, to watch for it to randomly jump and grab.

"It's not just a statue. Now open your fucking eyes. I'll give you until the count of three. That's one, two..."

The thing opens its eyes and looks right at me. "Three."

I step closer, lips tight, sword clutched harder. "Don't be smart. What did you say before? How do we open the door?"

It looks at me and then looks at Alice. The stone where its head joins its body groans with the movement and then it settles, its eyes back on me. "You have to give it the right answers," it says to me.

"Give who? You?"

"No." It doesn't turn its head to indicate anything, but it looks and I follow its gaze to the doors. Was that there before? Like that? Maybe I didn't see it before, when we were walking up, but the doors... either side where the hearts are in the middle, are two cards of the heart suit, and in

the middle, where the door joins is the playing card, the Queen of Hearts. Only she has a heart in the middle, which means this is not the actual Queen of Hearts, because I know inside hers is nothing that resembles feeling. "She requires payment," the card says.

"Payment? What kind of payment? We don't have anything to give." Maybe Alice has noticed it too, what we didn't notice before, because she's eyeing the whole door too and frowning at it like she's trying to work it out.

"Steel will not turn it," the card says.

"Then what does?"

It's the other card behind Alice that moves and she jumps, stepping away from it. I step back from the card I'm at, and step in front of her a little. I raise the sword to both of them. I don't care if they're made of stone or marble. I don't care if they're hard. One move...

"The past is the key. One of sorrow. One of loss."

"One of a path refocused. Lay them bare, let them breathe."

"Only then shall the way be freed."

"Riddles." Oh, how I hate riddles. "What the hell does that mean?"

The card to my side stares at me. It doesn't have an expression, nothing to give away what it's thinking or feeling. "Three echoes of time. Give it the truth."

"The truth?"

Alice puts her hand on my shoulder. "Memories. I think they mean memories. The key is the past? Three echoes of time." She nods to where we are. "This is the hall of memories. That's what it needs as payment?"

"One of sorrow. One of loss," the card repeats.

And Alice adds, "One of a path refocused. That's what it wants, Hook." She turns to look at the Queen's face on the card. "Pain and suffering. A memory of loss, one of sorrow and one of a path refocused."

I watch her. I don't know what she's doing, but she sucks in a breath, steadying herself, and walks toward the doors. There's something in her expression—not quite sadness, but something...different.

"The first time I saw the White Rabbit," she says, voice quieter than before, "I was sitting with my sister in the garden. Under the big tree at the bottom of our yard." She hesitates. "Grace was reading. I was sitting. I was bored out of my mind."

She lets out a short, breathy laugh, but there's no humour in it.

“There were no pictures in her book. No colours. Just page after page of dull words. I always liked the books with pictures. They told the best stories.” Her fingers trail absentmindedly along the carved door, tracing the endless swirling patterns. “I didn’t understand how she could be so... boring. How she could just sit there, eyes glued to something so lifeless. How she could stand it.”

She glances over her shoulder at me, and I catch something raw in her gaze.

It’s not even a sad story. But somehow, it is.

Alice turns back to the door, her hands still pressed against it.

“My mother was inside. She didn’t like us playing out there too long—she’d always say we’d track mud into the house or ruin our clothes, or something equally important. She liked things neat. Clean. Predictable.”

She exhales.

“I saw something move by the tree. At first, I thought it was a cat—a flash of white in the green. But then I saw the waistcoat. The pocket watch.” A small, wistful smile flickers across her lips. “I don’t know why, but I knew I had to follow it. I remember looking at Grace, but she didn’t notice—she was too busy absorbing every single word of that stupid book. So I got up. I walked away. No one stopped me.”

Her hands tighten against the door.

“No one even noticed.”

I don’t say anything.

She’s looking at the carvings now, not at me. Her fingers trace the lines absentmindedly, like she isn’t even aware she’s doing it.

“I followed him through the garden. Past the flowerbeds, past the fence. I crawled through the gap at the bottom—the one I wasn’t supposed to. Got dirt all over my dress.” She lets out a hollow breath, shaking her head. “I remember thinking, ‘Mum’s going to be mad.’ Like that was the worst thing in the world. Like that was the biggest problem.”

She falls silent for a moment, her hand resting against the heart in the middle of the door. And then—

“When I found the hole, I didn’t even hesitate. I just climbed in.” Her voice is quieter now, like she’s speaking more to herself than to me.

She exhales slowly, her shoulders curling in just a fraction. “Falling into that hole... for the first time, it felt like I belonged somewhere. Like I

wasn't in the way. Like I wasn't a problem. It sounds so stupid now, looking back, but that's what I felt. Like I was... me."

Her hand presses against the door, fingers flexing like she's trying to steady herself.

"I was only in the garden because my mother was mad at me." She lets out a breath that isn't quite a laugh. It's too empty. Too bitter. "Which wasn't unusual."

She swallows, her throat working around something heavier than words. "My gran had just come back from one of her trips. She loved to travel, always brought me back something. Art things. Little books of postcards, sketchpads, charcoal pencils. She gave me one that day."

Alice drags a hand through her hair, but it's not frustration—it's something else. Something brittle.

"My mother was furious. She told Gran she was encouraging me to be a failure. That she was filling my head with nonsense, making me soft, making me weak."

She blinks rapidly and looks away, her jaw tensing, like she's trying to hold herself together.

"That's what I was to my mother. A failure. Grace was everything, and I was always the disappointment."

A pause. A deep, slow inhale.

"I didn't even look at the book my gran got me. Just dropped it straight into the box—the one my mother kept for things we gave away." Her voice tightens, like it hurts to admit. "And I knew my gran saw. I knew she did. And I knew it hurt her."

She shakes her head, her hand curling slightly against the door, fingertips pressing into the carved heart. "But I wanted my mother to like me."

"When I climbed through that rabbit hole... it was like, for the first time, I was me. When I climbed back out... I'd changed."

Alice's voice is steady, but there's something brittle in it, something that makes my chest feel tight. She exhales, as if that breath could wipe away everything she just admitted. Then she looks at the door, tilting her head like she's judging herself.

"Do you think that's sad enough?" she asks, almost flippant. "Or just plain pathetic?"

I don't answer because I don't think she actually wants one. She turns toward me instead, her expression smoothing out into something unreadable. "Your turn, Hook. You get the joy of loss."

And just like that, my heart slams into my ribs. Because I know exactly where my mind goes first. Sam.

But I can't.

I won't.

Not for her. Not for this place. Not for the damn Queen. I do not owe her that debt.

Alice is watching me, waiting. "It has to be something painful," she says softly.

"Yeah," I mutter, forcing my muscles to unclench. "It wouldn't want anything else."

I don't give Alice the sword back as I step up to the door. The right heart, the one opposite hers, is smooth beneath my palm. Warm. Not like someone's just been here, but like something behind this door is alive.

A heat like smouldering embers. Like the kind of fire that doesn't go out.

I grit my teeth and shut my eyes.

"My mother died when I was ten," I say, and the words feel foreign on my tongue. Like something I shouldn't be speaking aloud. I keep my eyes closed because I don't want to see Alice's face—don't want to see that undeserved sorrow she'll throw my way. I don't deserve it.

I don't need it.

I force my breath out slow, dragging the words up from where I buried them years ago. "After Sam."

The two hardest words in my head.

Because everything is after Sam.

Not during Sam, not before Sam. Just after. Like the moment he was gone, time started fresh, and I stopped belonging to the world I'd known.

"We lived by the docks. Where the boats came in at night, where the fishermen came with their catch and sold them at market." My voice is steadier than it should be. Detached. Like I'm telling someone else's story. Maybe that makes it easier. Maybe it makes it worse.

"I used to gather the scraps. My mother would cook them up, and we'd have fresh fish for dinner. Sometimes she'd come down to the docks too. She liked to talk. She had a friend there—a woman. They used to smoke

dried poppies. I didn't know what they were then." I pause, swallowing against the tightness in my throat. "She only smoked them sometimes. But after..." I clench my jaw. "After ... she smoked them all the time."

I lean my head against the door and close my eyes for just a second. I let the story fill my head, let the sounds and the smells come into it. "It was six months after Sam. She wasn't coping so well. She wasn't coping at all. She'd given up." I lift my head again, don't remove my hand, but I look up at the door, at where my hand is because it feels warmer, hotter. I can feel the heart where I have my hand, absorbing the memory. Like it's drinking it in. "I came home one night from..." I shake my head. That doesn't matter. "I thought she was asleep at first when I didn't hear her. But she was gone. She'd died." I swallow hard at that, at the words.

"Hook..." Alice's voice is soft and gentle, and I turn only to meet her eyes. She doesn't say anything else, but her eyes shimmer. "I'm sorry."

Chapter Seventy-Seven

ALICE

THE WAY he tells it makes my heart beat a little faster. I can see it in my head—not Hook the man, but the little boy who should never have witnessed such horrors. I don't go to him. His pain might be raw and fresh because that's what the door demanded, but this wasn't meant to be a heart-to-heart. Even if it was, I doubt he'd welcome the comfort. So I look away and give him privacy with his memories, just as he did with mine. There's no escaping the things that hurt.

"A path focused," I say instead, trying to change the subject, or at least scratch out whatever it is I'm feeling about what he shared. "Any idea what that's meant to mean?"

Hook clears his throat. His story seems stuck there, as if it's become something physical. "I reckon it's where something was changed, perhaps?"

"But painful." Right, I can do painful. "Do you think we have to do it together with it being one heart? Or maybe it doesn't matter?" I glance at the door. "Maybe it just needs two hands. If someone were opening the door by themselves, they'd place two hands side by side."

Hook pulls his hand from the carved heart. The doors have shifted—or perhaps I have. Either way, something's different. He spreads his fingers across his side of the door, and I find myself watching the movement. His hands are strong, precise, capable. My pulse quickens, and bloody hell, apparently, I'm actually fourteen years old again.

I hesitate before matching his position on my side. The movement brings me closer to him—too close. Close enough that awareness crackles between us, sharp and dangerous, and I have to take in yet another breath to gather myself.

He's staring at me too, which isn't helping. Because the way Hook looks, it isn't just looking, it's seeing. Like he's managing to see right inside me, and honestly, I'd lay myself out bare to him and that scares the shit out of me. "Maybe we need separate memories," I manage.

"The cards said three memories. I don't think the order matters."

Our hands spread across the door, thumbs nearly touching. The space between them burns. "My grandmother," I start. "The one whose funeral I'm supposed to be attending. She changed. Maybe that's the memory I can give it." Because it hurts. It bloody hurts, even now. "She started to forget things a few years ago. Small things at first, funny things, and we'd all laugh, even her, but it was the start."

I meet Hook's stare and swallow. "She had dementia. It's the worst thing my gran could have got. She... I think the hardest part was watching her lose herself. She lost her love of reading first. She tried to read, but nothing went in." I smile, though it isn't funny. "I once found her reading, and she had her book upside down. She liked to write letters, too, or cards. Little notes with paintings and drawings on them. She slowly lost little parts of herself."

I shake my head, not meaning for this to hurt so badly, and it isn't like I've not talked about it before. I have, to Chris. But Hook is quiet, he's listening to me when I say it and somehow, that makes me feel my memory even more. "I've been waiting for her to die, I think. I'm not sad to have missed her funeral."

Hook doesn't say anything. But his other hand finds mine, his warm fingers sliding over my palm. The heat blooms, curling under my skin. Unwanted and wanted all at once.

"After my mother died, I went to live with my uncle—her brother. I didn't really like him. He didn't like me. We barely knew each other. He and my mother never really got on. When he came around, it was always the same argument: how she should sign the house over to him, how she wasn't looking after two children properly. If she signed everything to him, he'd look after her. But she never did." Hook's voice turns hard. "After she died, apart from me, he was her only living relative. He got everything.

Not that she had much, but the house was worth something and he sold it. I never saw a damn penny of it."

His grip on my hand tightens slightly. "I think Sam and my mother were the lucky ones. My uncle made sure to make my life hell after. Like he had to punish me because I existed. His favourite tool was a leather strap used for sharpening his blade for shaving. It had a good snap to it." Hook tilts his chin, revealing just a patch where his stubble doesn't grow, replaced by a silvery line. "I have many like this across my body. He didn't just take a pound of gold from us; he liked to take a pound of flesh too."

This memory isn't sad when he speaks it, but there's something wistful in his tone. The part about his brother and mother being lucky carries a bitterness that's reflected in his eyes. He means what he says. The door knows it too, because the heart under our hands flares, almost too hot to touch. When I go to pull away, Hook says, "Don't." His voice is rough, commanding, but there's something else there too—something that makes my breath catch.

We feel it before we hear it—all the mechanisms inside the door clicking in and out of place. The whole door is alive, which explains why Hook couldn't pick the lock. "It's no wonder your knife snapped," I say.

"It was a brave little knife." We let go of the door and step back. We release each other's hands too, and I feel the sudden absence like a physical thing. Hook grabs the sword before I can reach it, and as the door starts to open, he raises it, ready if whatever waits on the other side decides to attack.

Nothing does. There's nothing there. Just like the rest of this place, it's grand and beautiful. The kind of entry way my mother would marvel at. Like the outside, it's bright and clean, all marble. But it's cold too. I go in first, but Hook stays close beside me, his presence both reassuring and distracting. When we step inside, our footsteps echo. "Did the queen just abandon this place?" It feels that way. Like there hasn't been anyone here in years. But it's clean. Deserted.

"I don't trust it," Hook says, scrutinising everything. The tension in his body radiates off him, and I find myself hyper-aware of how close he stands.

The walls seem to ripple as we walk by them. We're side by side, moving through the hallway lined with arches and windows. The ceiling soars above us, hung with chandeliers. "These aren't windows," I say. They

look like windows, but they're... screens? I'm not even sure. Each one is different, like it has a different outside behind it. I reach out to touch the first one. "Could these be... are these memories?"

That makes me pull away, because I don't want to pry into someone else's life. I wouldn't want anyone looking into mine. "The hall of memories." I frown. "Do you think this is where all the memories go?" I didn't notice it before, but as I look and as we walk, each tile on the wall is like a drawer. Or maybe they've changed? I don't even know anymore, but this is Wonderland. Anything's possible.

"I'd say, if the Queen can use them to fuel magic, then yeah, they probably are." He stops and looks back the way we came. We've turned corners, following the hallway around to the right. He huffs out a breath. "I think maybe this corridor goes all the way around."

"Here." I'm a little ahead of Hook. "This one is a door."

He nudges me aside as if something might burst out of there too and tries the handle. It opens. The room is dark. "Light it up."

I do what I did in the oubliette and summon the light to my hands. It amazes me how easily I can do that now, but then it shouldn't amaze me. I toss the small light ball into the room. "It's empty."

But that doesn't stop Hook from going in, his sword still at the ready, ever cautious.

"There's nothing in here," I say as I follow him, but it's like stepping into another world as soon as I do. I turn and spin, and Hook is beside me, but the room isn't empty and we're not even in the room anymore and—hell. I don't know. "Where the heck am I?" The light from my ball blooms and spreads as I spin. "No. No, no, no." I'm in my mum's house. "No. Hook? Shit." This can't be. I didn't— My pulse rises, beating frantically in my chest, and my stomach goes hollow. No. This can't be. Did Wonderland kick me out again? But I'm not beside the tree, I'm not in the garden.

I'm at the bottom of the stairs in my mum's house. "I have to go back." I reach blindly behind me, hoping to feel Hook's solid presence, but there's nothing. I go to rush through the kitchen, but what stops me is the three suitcases by the stairs. They're pushed neatly together, with some boxes. I recognise them, but they don't make sense. Why are they here? They're my dad's. It's been more than a decade since he left. Almost two, I'm sure. The voices on the next floor grab my attention. Arguing. My mum and dad. What is my dad doing here? This makes no sense.

I go to head up there to confront them. I'm not a kid anymore they can just tell to get lost. She can't just tell to go, but the footsteps echo and they're coming towards me, so I step back. My father is at the head of the stairs, and he looks younger. There's more colour to his hair, no middle-aged spread to his belly. He's wearing jeans and a shirt. He looks handsome, but tired. His eyes are red.

My mum isn't far behind him. She doesn't look so different. Younger, too. "You want it this way. You asked for it this way."

"So this is my fault, is it? All mine?"

"Mum? Dad?" I say, but neither of them says anything, neither of them even looks at me. I wave my hand in front of my father's face. Nothing. "I'm right here." But I'm not, am I? Not really. This is just a memory. My heart pounds harder as I realise, I'm trapped in this moment

I want Hook here. The thought comes unbidden, but it's true. I want his steady presence beside me, his sharp edges and careful strength.

My father spins on my mother, and his jaw is tight, his body tense. "I have no fucking idea what it is you want from me. This isn't even a marriage anymore."

"Well, perhaps if you started to be a husband, it would be."

"Stop it," I say to them both. "Just stop it." My voice sounds hollow in this memory space.

"And what is a husband? Huh?" He puts his hands through his hair, shaking his head, heaving in breaths. "I can't work like this. It can't be like this."

"It's because of Alice, isn't it?"

"What?" He frowns at her, a different kind of frown, a truly 'I don't know what the hell you mean' kind of frown.

My stomach drops. I'm suddenly ten years old again, listening from the top of the stairs, feeling like everything wrong in the world is somehow my fault. Not this argument. I never saw this, but I'd seen enough of them.

"If I hadn't had her, we'd have worked."

"Don't you dare," I snap at my mother, moving between them. "Don't you bloody dare put this on me."

"No, it's not about Alice. She's our daughter. She didn't do this."

"She's damaged."

"She isn't damaged, Elizabeth."

I flinch at the word 'damaged.' All these years later, it still cuts.

"She's always away in the clouds. You encourage her. My mother encourages her. That girl needs to get with the real world. She needs to start learning and stop all that stupid painting. She needs to be more like..." but my mother cuts off.

"More like Grace? You're not being fair to her."

But my mother isn't listening to him. She's away with her thoughts and I've heard these a million times. I was at school when this played out. "I'm going to get her an appointment with Dr Riley. See what he says."

"She's not sick. There's nothing wrong with her."

"She never does as she's told. It's not right. And you don't help with her. Always siding with her. Always doing what she wants. She controls this house, and you let her get away with it."

"You make her sound like an enemy."

"She's made it this way."

My father lifts a small box and unhooks a plastic suit packet from the banister. "I'll pick the girls up from school today and bring them home. Then we'll talk to them. I'll have them this weekend."

"Not Alice," my mother says.

"What? What do you mean not Alice? She's my daughter. I can't—"

"No. She needs to learn. She needs to understand how the world works and that everything has a consequence."

He shakes his head. "All she did was sneak off to her tree. She did no harm."

"No. She did harm. She lives in that fantasy world of hers, talking about talking caterpillars and cats that float. There's something wrong with that girl. You can collect Grace on Saturday, but for now, Alice stays with me. I don't want you filling her head with all these flights of fancy. It isn't right."

He stares at her, and I can see the millions of thoughts racing behind his eyes. "You'll break her heart if you don't let her come with Grace."

My mother shrugs. "It's not my place to tend to their hearts. It's my place to make sure they turn out right, and that girl is everything we didn't want."

"Everything you didn't want. How can you say that about your own daughter?"

"She was a mistake. I only wanted Grace."

I can't breathe. Her words sting hard. I stagger back, clutching at my chest.

"You even got that wrong, didn't you? Got me pregnant with her and then gave me your faulty dreams. I don't know what is in that girl's head half the time. It is up to me to teach her. Grace can go with you. Alice will stay here."

"You can't keep me from my daughter. You have no right."

"I am her mother. You have a problem with it, you can call my solicitor."

It isn't this scene that gets me so much. It's the moment after. My father leaves. I know how this goes now. He leaves and when I come back from school, he's gone. He didn't pick us up from school. I didn't even know he was going to.

It doesn't matter. The scene changes and the dinner table is set. I back up from it, because I know what comes next. I know how this goes.

We sit at the table for dinner, and we wait for Dad, only there isn't a place set for him, and when Grace and I ask where he is, our mother tells us. "He's gone," she says. "He's left us." And even Grace is shocked by it, but she picks up her fork and eats and carries on like our whole world isn't about to crash down.

"Why?" I ask her.

Our mother puts her knife and fork down, resting them precisely at the sides of her plate. "Because of you and Wonderland," she says to me, looking me straight in the eyes. "He was tired of hearing about it and now he's gone." She looks to Grace then. "He'll be picking you up on Saturday, Grace. He'll bring you back Sunday at noon."

"And me?" I hear my younger self ask, voice small and scared, the tremor in it breaking my heart all over again. I want to reach for her—for myself—to tell her that none of this is her fault, that Wonderland is real, that she'll find her way back here someday and meet a grumpy pirate with sad eyes who'll make her feel more seen than her own family ever did.

My mother's eyes turn cold. "You will not be going with your father. He can't handle your stories anymore. No one can."

I watch my younger self crumple, the dreams in her eyes dimming like stars being snuffed out one by one. I hadn't remembered this moment being so brutal, so precise in its cruelty. Or maybe I had buried it, tucked it away with all the other sharp-edged memories that cut too deep.

"You're lying," I say to my mother now, circling the table like a wounded animal. "He wanted me. You kept me away from him." I slam my hand down on the table, but it makes no impact, no sound. I'm a ghost here. "You used me as a weapon in your war with him, and you made me believe it was all my fault."

My mother turns to me. She meets my gaze. "It's not real, Alice," she says. Someone is tugging at my arm, pulling me, and I turn and it's my dad. "It's not real. Wake up."

I have to blink. The world collides, and everything in my head hums and doesn't make sense, and I...

Hands grip the sides of my face and make me turn, and I expect to see my father, to meet his eyes, to look up at him, but I'm not little and this isn't my father. It's Hook.

"It's not real," he says to me.

"Hook..."

I don't even realise I've been crying until his thumb brushes along the top of my cheek. "It's just a memory. It can't hurt you."

I shift so I can look at the room behind me. My mother, me, my sister, frozen.

Hook pulls me to him, wrapping his arms around me, and I breathe him in, feel the soft leather of his jacket, smell him. He always smells like the ocean, like air. Like the outside, so fresh. I could close my eyes and sink into that feeling and stay there.

His arms tighten just slightly, and I become aware of how my body fits against his, of the steady beat of his heart against my cheek. The warmth of him chases away the cold left by the memory.

"You saw it too?" I ask, my voice muffled against his chest.

"Enough," he says, and there's a roughness to his voice that wasn't there before.

Chapter Seventy-Eight

HOOK

I HAVE no idea how we get out of this place, nor do I care. I push the door open to the house that I assume must be the house Alice grew up in. Very English. A stately home of some kind. Her family must be worth something to live in such a place, but either way, it doesn't matter. I'm getting her out of there.

I push the door open and squint at the sun. "This way," I say, not that I have any idea which way to go, but anywhere seems better than back in there with her parents.

She peers back to them, but lets me lead her, her hand in mine. I have my sword ready. "This way," Alice says, and she pulls me so we head towards the side of the house and not out the front gate. But the weather turns as soon as we round the corner. "This isn't the—"

But I'm not hearing her. I lower my sword and step out onto the hill, my boots crunching against the frozen ground. I push Alice back. "Watch it." Just as a cart, drawn by a single horse with matted mane, almost runs us both over. I let go of her and step out into the road.

The sky hangs low and grey like a dirty sheet. The place reeks of smoked meat and fish, the stench clinging to my clothes. The air is thick with salt and memories. The sea, mixed in with dirt and grime. I lift my hand in front of my face. It isn't mine. It doesn't feel like mine. My fingers are foreign things. Wind whips at my face, biting cold and carrying the

sharp scent of the ocean. A smell that once meant freedom now does nothing but turn my stomach to acid.

"Sam..."

I'm at the docks. I don't even think about it as I run along the wooden planks, each one creaking beneath my weight. Past all the moorings, past the fishing boats with their peeling paint and salt-crusted ropes. Past sailors with weathered faces passing crates between hands rough as bark. Wooden boxes of fish, woven baskets of crabs. The ground beneath me is slick and treacherous, littered with fish heads and slimy guts that shine in the weak light. I run through them, boots slipping, the stench rising with each step.

The voices pull me forward. The shouting. The crying. I skid, almost falling, round the corner that's seared into my brain like a brand.

I even know what's going to happen, but I can't stop it. A hand, calloused and strong, grabs me by the back of my jacket and yanks me back, nearly knocking me to my knees. The fabric cuts into my throat. I shout out, voice cracking. "Get off me," and then push at the hands that have me, desperate to break free from the past that won't let go.

"You think you can steal from us, you little piece of shit?"

It isn't just a him. It's a them. Three of them yanking me back, pulling me against the hard wood and not giving a shit if I stand or not. I scramble to stay upright, to get to my feet, to even push them off, but they're bigger than me, stronger than me. They smell like booze and sweat and rotting fish. They drag me down the steps, to the lower level and then fling me, and I go then, tripping over my own feet, unable to stop it. I go flying, flailing, falling with hands out. I roll, but one of my knees slams off the hard floor, and the wind is knocked out of me.

I turn quickly, ready to protect myself from them, from the next onslaught. Josiah Carrick stands there, watching me. His face smudged with coal dust, those dark, cruel eyes fixed on me. "James," he says. One word, but there is nothing nice in his tone.

I'm not a coward. I don't run, but I try to scramble back, almost on instinct, but they're around me. I get to my feet, head away from them and immediately slam into Nate. Nate Flint...

He shoves me back. "Not this way," he says.

"Please. I..." Some strange part of me doesn't actually catch up. I'm me. I'm fucking Captain Hook, feared in Neverland, ruler of the sea, and

here... I'm no one. I almost expect it not to be the same, but it is. Nate's brother, big and burly. Older than everyone. He drags out the small, squirming form. The cries and the protests. My heart stutters in my chest.

"Sam," I say. He's so little and weaker. Weaker than I remember him, smaller. His face is dirty too. There's fresh blood spilling from his nose, and his eye is already swollen. "Let him go," I say, looking up to Josiah. "Please. He's just a kid. He has nothing to do with this." Sam... Sam who followed me and I didn't know. Sam who wanted to be like me.

"You're a thief, Cookie. I don't like thieves in my circle. You know that."

"I know. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. I..." But I can't take my eyes off Sam. Everything in me screams at them, is ready to fight, wants to take him away from them. "Please."

"You cost me a lot of money and almost one of my patrons. I can't have that. I can't have people with me who do not know their places, who do not have my back. Do you understand?"

"I do. I'm sorry. Please. Let him go. Don't hurt him."

"Oh, I'm not going to hurt him." Josiah steps back, and there is a leer in his face. He goes to Sam and grabs him by the hair. He gets down level with him and Sam is crying, tears and snot spilling from his face. He pushes at him. "I'd say you've got about ten minutes to do what you need." And without warning, he pushes Sam back, pushing him away. Sam goes to grab him but Josiah steps out of the way so Sam has nothing to grab.

I scream. I don't realise I do it, the sound so loud as he goes backwards. He loses his footing, falling back off the side, tripping over the chains that separate the world from the edge and he's over it. I hear him scream, hear the splash.

Josiah peers over the edge.

"Looks like you've got a few minutes. He's going down."

"Please, he can't swim."

"Oh he can't? Well, you better run then." They push me away, releasing me. There's no way I'm getting past them to get to Sam. I can only run, run away and back home, which I do. Racing back across the steps across the path to where my mother's house is. I feel the air burning in my lungs, feel the cold wind whipping against my face, the desperation clawing at my throat.

The small pouch they want is under the back step, under the rocks and the wood. I run around the back, digging at it with bare fingers, tearing my nails on the rough stone. It takes me no time to grab it, to snatch it and put it in my pocket.

"Hook," someone says as I run back. A woman, standing in the middle of the road. So out of place in her modern clothes, but I don't have time to register it. She goes to stand in my way, and I push around her.

"No," I say. "Get out of my way."

"Hook, stop."

She goes to grab my arm and I shove her off, making her fall back. She doesn't hit the ground but almost. Her face—familiar somehow—is twisted with concern, not anger.

I get back to the road that leads to the docks. Josiah, Nate and his brother are there, waiting for me. They have others with them now. Edward and Toby. Six of them against one of me. Six men against a desperate boy.

"Please," I say, my voice breaking. "Please don't." I give Josiah the pouch with shaking hands. "It's all there."

Josiah takes it from me, his gaze meeting mine. He holds it there deliberately, savouring my fear before he finally opens the pouch and tips out five guineas. The gold catches the grey light as they spill into his palm. He counts them slowly, deliberately, each coin another second ticking away for Sam.

I go to get past them. They have what they need. I just need Sam. They can have the money. My pride. Everything. But as I move, Nate slams me in the chest, his palm flat against my sternum. The blow knocks me back a step.

"Not so fast."

"You have your money," I plead. "Please. I need to get to my brother."

"Hook." It's the woman again. I don't know what she wants, nor do I care. She's heading towards us, determination in her stride.

Josiah steps up to me, his face inches from mine. I can smell the gin on his breath, see the cold hatred in his eyes.

"You are lucky I didn't kill you. It is only because of who your father is, but you don't get to steal from me." Without warning, he balls his fist and slams it into my middle, making me double over, the wind knocked out of me. Nate grabs my hair and yanks my head back up, forcing me to look at them.

Someone hits me. I don't know who it is. A fist connects with my jaw, snapping my head to the side. As I go down, a boot comes to my ribs, to my side, but I roll away, tasting blood in my mouth.

"Leave him alone!" the woman shouts, her voice distant through the ringing in my ears.

It's hard to run and to move. Pain lances through me with each breath, each step, but I have to get to Sam. I stagger down to the dock, to the steps that lead to the water and the Quay. Down the quay steps, my legs nearly giving out beneath me.

"No, no... Sam."

He's floating in the water, face down, his legs out, his arms at either side like he's flying. So still. Too still. I throw myself into the cold water, the shock of it stealing my breath. The North Sea bites into my skin like a thousand knives as I grab him, pull him out through the sludge, the muck.

"Sam..." His skin is blue-grey, his lips colourless. Water streams from his mouth and nose as I drag him onto the dock. He's so light. So small.

"Sam, please."

I turn him over, push against his chest like I've seen the fishermen do. Nothing. Nothing.

"Breathe," I beg, my voice breaking. "Please breathe."

I push again, harder, water spilling from his lips. His head lolls to the side, lifeless.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, gathering him against me. His small body is cold, so cold against mine. I rock him back and forth. "I'm so sorry."

"Hook," comes a voice, distant and female. No. I can't listen. I ... "James." TMy brain can't reconcile what I see and what I feel and none of it makes any fucking sense.

Hands come to the side of my face, pressing in on me. "It's a dream, James. It's not real." She tugs at me, pulling me by the hand, back up the steps.

"I have to save Sam. I... I have to. He's not breathing. He's..."

Her eyes glisten and she nods. "I know."

I have to heave in the breath to steady my chest, to steady me and I glance back to where Sam floats dead in the water, in the rubbish, but he isn't there. We're on the floor in the hallway, marble and stone around us, those strange windows. "I didn't get back in time."

Chapter Seventy-Nine

ALICE

HOOK WALKS AHEAD OF ME. Not by much—just a step or two—but it feels like miles. His steps are purposeful, strong. I don't really know what to say to him, because although he says nothing, I see it all, feel it all. It isn't my memory, but it clings to me like a vine around my heart that I can't shake off. It's thick and raw, and every piece of it hurts, as if I can't breathe from it.

I want to go to him and tell him I'm sorry. I want to go to him and make him know that it's okay. He was a child. I know he won't accept it though. His silence isn't just silence—it's a wall, a barrier.

I have to take in a deep breath against what plays over and over in my head. How can anyone have done that, have seen that? I can't even imagine the aftermath of it, but Hook... The way he ran, the way he screamed. When he practically threw himself into the water to pull his brother out.

I want to reach for him. I want to do something. Anything.

My fingers twitch at my sides, remembering how his skin felt under my touch when I cupped his face. The warmth of him, the way his pulse jumped beneath my fingertips, even with him locked in that memory. Hook doesn't want comfort. He doesn't do vulnerability.

His jaw is locked, muscles jumping beneath the skin as he grinds his teeth. Even his shoulders are tight, his fists clenched and the one around the sword, more so. The silver of it catches the light of this place, throwing fractured reflections against the walls.

Hook doesn't look at me. Doesn't slow. Just keeps walking. I let him take the lead here. Whatever it is I feel inside my chest, is this way, and maybe he feels it too. Or maybe he just happens to be going the right way. I can't even describe how it feels. It's like something inside me knows that we have to go this way. Something knows this is right.

There are many doors. Hook opens two or three, and eyes them, but we don't go into them. I don't think either of us trusts it. One of the rooms is a bedroom—a child's bedroom by the looks of things. But it morphs into a graveyard, and then a grave with flowers and teddy bears on it.

The air here feels wrong. Too thick, like breathing in syrup. It carries the musty scent of old books and something else—something metallic that catches in the back of my throat. Magic. But not the clean, bright kind I'm learning to control. This is older. Darker.

"Are everyone's memories here?" I ask out loud. "Is this where all the things end up?"

Hook stops so suddenly I nearly crash into him. The scent of leather and silver and something uniquely him—pine needles and storm clouds—wraps around me.

I catch myself just in time, my hands hovering, unsure if I should steady myself on him. He exhales sharply through his nose, rolling his shoulders back. The movement draws my attention to the breadth of them, to the way his coat stretches across his back. Not that I'm noticing. Not now. Not here.

"Do not," he says, voice low and tight, each word precise and cutting, "start philosophising. This place is already enough of a mindfuck."

He's not wrong. God, he's not wrong.

We keep moving. "I can't believe there's no one in here," I say. "Not even inside, no guards, nothing."

He pushes open another door and this one has steps to it and pauses, as if debating, then he takes the first step. "They don't need them by the look of things. This place is enough to send you running." We get down the steps, to the bottom, and it is dark. "This place is like a god damn maze."

"It doesn't look this big on the outside."

"No. I don't think it is." He narrows his eyes to look around us. "I think this entire place is fucking with us."

Up ahead, a doorway flickers. Like there's a fluorescent light inside the room. Hook halts again and this time I do bump into him. My chest

colliding with his back. The solid warmth of him sends an inappropriate flutter through my stomach, despite everything.

He doesn't react. Just lifts his sword, fingers wrapped tightly around the hilt. My heart lurches, then plummets, because the voice that calls my name next is nothing to do with here, and nothing to do with Hook.

It's me.

I know that voice.

I'd know it anywhere.

Something in my chest cracks open, spilling warmth and pain in equal measure. I shove past Hook, barely registering his sharp "Alice—" before running forward, heart hammering against my ribs like it's trying to escape.

Gran. She stands just ahead in the archway, looking exactly like I remember her. Before the illness. Before the care home my mother put her in. Her grey hair still streaked with blonde, her blue eyes bright with warmth. She's wearing that awful cardigan she loved so much—the one with an embroidered little witch on it. It was so out of shape and god knows what, but so Gran.

"Oh, Alice," she says, and there is so much love in those two words that I nearly break right then and there. My eyes burn, my vision blurs. I go to her, but before I do, something in her expression shifts, her mouth tightening. A new light enters her eyes, one colder, sharper. Wrong. "You left me, Alice," she says. I stop dead and ice spears through my veins right into my chest. "You left me in that place to die. You never came to see me. None of you did." Her voice takes an edge I've never really heard from her before. It's deep and bitter and cutting. "You didn't come."

My throat locks up. "Gran, I—"

She lifts a finger, wagging it at me. The gesture is so familiar that it hurts, but she used to do it when I was little out of fun. She'd wag her finger when I was teasing. "Don't make excuses. You went off and lived life, and didn't even bother. I wrote to you. I sent you cards, letters, and pictures."

My chest burns. Guilt and confusion war inside me, because those parts don't make sense. I did see her. Not often. I hated the place, hated to see what she'd become. She wasn't my Gran anymore. Just an empty woman who kind of looked like her. "I didn't get any cards," I say, though. "If I did, I would have replied, you know that."

We did that too. She always wrote to me when I moved out. She sent me cards and silly little things. Sent me pictures. Always signed them, '*your turn.*' So I wrote back to her, and sent her descriptions of my days and pictures of where I was. And then her letters slowed, and stopped and got lost. She couldn't read mine anymore, my mother said. *Stop sending the letters Alice. You're upsetting your grandmother.* And I never wanted to do that so I stopped.

"It's not real." Hook's voice cuts through the air beside me. The heat of him at my back is sudden and solid and grounding. I jolt, my breath catching. His gaze is locked on my grandmother too—but not with softness, not with sympathy. With cold calculation. "This place feeds on what we fear, what hurts us, what we regret. It's not real, Alice. She isn't real."

And before we can even let those words sink in, another voice joins us. "It is real."

Cold goes through me as I turn and I feel Hook stiffen beside me. At the top of the steps we came down, stands a boy. Small. Younger. Features so much like Hook's. I'd have to be an idiot not to know who he is.

"You left, too. Didn't you, James? You left me to die."

I feel Hook tense, his entire body going rigid. The change in him is instantly visceral. I want to reach for him too and he lets me, kind of. His breath is sharp, the grip on the sword iron-like.

"You're not real either." His voice is a growl, low and dangerous. "Come on."

He grabs my wrist before I can argue with him, before I can even think and drags me down more. His grip is tight enough to leave a bruise, but I welcome it. It helps me focus and helps me to feel.

"Alice. Don't leave again. You left me in that place. Alice. I miss you."

I glance back. I can't help it. Her face—the only version of her I ever let myself remember—is twisted with sorrow. With disappointment. And it hurts. God, it hurts. Like someone's reached into my chest and squeezed.

"You're not real," I say, but my voice wavers. Breaks.

"James. James, please don't go."

Hook doesn't look back.

I feel the moment he lets go of my wrist and clenches his fist instead. The loss of contact leaves a hollow feeling inside me. Then—she appears.

Not Sam. Not the boy.

A woman.

Tall. Sharp-featured. The same dark hair, the same eyes, the same set of his jaw. She's beautiful in a harsh way, like cut glass.

I know who she is before he even reacts.

Hook stops dead.

His mother.

His breath catches. His top lip twitches. For a moment, I see something raw and vulnerable flash across his face before he locks it down. "You can fuck off, too."

"Alice." A new voice. My father's. My stomach drops, nausea rising. The sound of his voice—so familiar, so wrong—makes me want to curl in on myself. Not because he's dead, and not because I did anything wrong, but I don't see him as much as I should either.

Hook curses under his breath, grabbing me again. His touch is gentler this time. "Don't look at them."

I don't. We break into a run and that feeling again is there, the one that tells me where to go, because Hook takes a turn and it's wrong.

"No," I say, pulling at him. "This way."

Behind us, the voices rise. My Gran, my dad, my mother. They're all there now. A chorus of guilt and regret. For Hook—his brother and his mother. I feel a deep sharp sadness at that, that they're the only ones there. Ghosts, but they cut so deep.

We go on. A glass door. I glance into it—not meaning to—but she's there. A figure in the centre of the room, kneeling. Chains wrapped around her wrists, giving her just enough room to move. Her red hair falls in tangles around her face, but I'd know her anywhere.

I freeze.

"Sophia," I say, her name catching in my throat as I stop.

Hook yanks me back, his hand sliding down to tangle with mine. The contact sends sparks up my arm, inappropriate and electric. "Not real, remember?"

But something in me knows different. This isn't like the others. This is... by the way Hook doesn't pull me back, and his grip tightens on my hand, I think he knows it too.

She's real.

Chapter Eighty

ALICE

"SHE'S REAL." I don't know why I know that, but I do. I feel it so deep inside me that if anyone were to prove it wasn't true, I'd still call them a liar. "Sophia?" Her name escapes my lips in a breathless whisper, as if speaking it too loudly might shatter the reality around us.

She isn't looking at us, isn't accusing us like the others. She isn't hurling accusations designed solely to break our minds. She's on her knees in the centre of the room, wrists bound by chains that rattle as she strains against them. I push at the door, but it doesn't budge. The handle doesn't even wriggle beneath my desperate grip. It's locked. Of course it's locked. Why would it be anything else?

Hook steps up. "Let me," and I press against the glass panel beside the door and knock. "Sophia?"

Her red hair hangs in tangled snarls, the intricate braids unravelled. Dirt streaks her face, her once-vibrant clothes now dull and tattered, as if the very life has been drained from the fabric. "What happened to you?"

Hook takes a step back, then raises his foot. "Hook..." I start, but he's already in motion and his foot slams into the panel of the door. It does nothing but make it rattle. "That's not going to—" I start, but he's already kicking again, and this time, the door flies open with a splintering crack that echoes through the chamber.

I don't hesitate. I rush to Sophia's side, dropping to my knees before her. "Sophia," I breathe, reaching for her hands. Her eyes are open but

unseeing, like clouded mirrors reflecting nothing. I wave my hands before her face, grab her bound wrists. Heart-shaped keyholes mock us from the chains, their intricate patterns seeming to shift in the dim light.

Hook is at the wall where the locks are attached by large bent pins. He rattles at them, trying to reach, but they're high and we have nothing to climb on. "Mama, I'm sorry," Sophia says. Tears streak down her cheeks, leaving clean trails through the grime. "I didn't mean to. I..." She nods, her bottom lip trembling. Her face crumples at whatever she's reliving.

"She's dreaming," Hook says, and I know. She's doing exactly what we did, stuck in moments of our lives--the worst moments. Sophia cries out, a sound of pure anguish that tears at my heart like broken glass.

"Get her out of these," I plead, not to Hook, but to myself, to anyone, as my fingers try to pry at the cuffs around her slim wrists.

Hook takes her hands, pushes her sleeves up so he can see. "We need a key." He pulls at the chains just to be sure, but they're locked down tight and will be made of the best metals. I know this. Hook knows this too.

"Hold her hands still." Maybe I can undo them myself. It's worth a shot. I place my hands at hers, giving room for Hook to hold her still so I can focus. I visualise my magic going in and turning the catches inside to free her. I imagine the clasps coming undone and the metal binds clanging to the floor. I imagine it all, in so many ways that my mind reels. I let out a breath. "It's no use. I can't get them undone."

He grabs her chin and tilts her head so we can see those swirling lilac eyes of hers. "It's not you. The chains will be magic-bound." He leans back on his haunches, and his mind is working, thinking. Sophia cries out in front of us again and I hold her hand tight, hoping that somehow, she knows someone is here with her. Someone has her, whatever it is she's living through.

"What if you tried the ones in the wall? They're not linked to her. Perhaps those aren't the same and you can get them undone."

Maybe. "Will you hold her?"

He takes her hand in place of mine. I don't want to leave her. His fingers brush mine as he does and at first, I think it's Hook's hand that grabs my wrist, but it's Sophia. She looks right at me, those eyes of hers focusing for just a second. "You have to help me," she pleads, her grip so tight that her nails threaten to break my skin. "You have to go to him and..."

"Sophia--"

She blinks.

"She's fighting it," Hook says.

"The Queen found out." She shakes her head, a violent, jerking motion. For a second, her gaze unfocuses, lost in whatever terrible vision haunts her. "No, no... I can't..."

I cup her face in my hands, my own eyes stinging with unshed tears. "Sophia, it's Alice. Look at me."

Her eyes meet mine, glassy and haunted like shattered stained glass. "I can't hold on," she whispers. "It's too strong."

"It isn't real," I tell her fiercely, pouring every ounce of conviction into my words. "None of it is real."

"She has him," Sophia chokes out. "She found out, and she took him."

"Who? Who does she have?" Hook asks.

Sophia shakes her head again, eyes squeezing shut as if she can block out the images by sheer force of will. "No. Not real." She opens her eyes, fixing me with a stare that seems to pierce my very soul, those swirling purple depths pulling me in. "Thorn. The Queen has Thorn. He helped you, and now she has him."

"Where does she have him?" Hook drops beside me, his shoulder pressing against mine as he leans in. "The Queen?"

Those swirling purple eyes fix on him, but I feel her trembling beneath my hands. "Your amulet is in the throne room. You have to get it. She has it. It's... too much power. Too..." She shakes her head, pushes up on her knees until her face hovers inches from mine, her breath warm against my cheek. "You know where it is. Get it. Save him. Save... Wonderland."

Her face contorts, twisting with urgency and fear. "You have to get to the throne. You have to sit on it. She hides it. She stole it."

She turns to Hook, desperate now, her words tumbling out. "She has to take the throne. The wrong magic steals from this world. Takes it. You have to get her there. You have to make her see. The right Queen has the amulet. Then we'll all be free."

"Riddles?"

"No." Hook's hand closes around my arm, his grip firm but gentle as he pulls me up. "The truth."

Chapter Eighty-One

ALICE

HOOK PULLS me out of the room, his grip tight on my wrist like it always is. Him taking the lead. Him knowing where we need to go.

But Sophia's voice rings in my ears. What she said. What it means.

I dare to look back at her as we leave. She's already gone, lost to whatever hell held her before.

I don't want to leave her.

But I have to.

Just like I left the Hatter. Like I left the Hare. Like I left the White Rabbit.

It's what they told me. I have to save Wonderland.

I do.

"I'll set you all free," I whisper to her.

We burst into the corridor, and Hook moves left, but I pull him back.

"No. Not that way."

He doesn't argue. Just nods. "Show me the way."

The tug inside me is strong, dragging me in the other direction. It's stronger than ever, stronger than anything I've ever felt. It beats under my skin like another heart sitting next to mine. It pushes me forward, pulling me through the corridors. I could close my eyes and still find the way.

The place fights us. I feel it.

The magic here is thick, almost physical. It presses against me, trying to slow us down, trying to turn us back.

I push through it.

The corridors stretch and shift, leading deeper into the... I don't even know what this place is. Castle? Palace? Something older. Something alive.

Down on this level, it's endless. The walls are lined with towering doors, some opening into empty rooms, others into places that shouldn't exist—a forest caught in autumn, leaves twisting in the air without falling; a city drowning in endless rain, the streets blurred in grey; a ballroom filled with faceless figures, waltzing to music I can't hear.

Hook keeps the sword raised, eyes scanning everything, ready for whatever comes next.

I don't slow.

The pulse under my skin beats louder, matching the rhythm in the stone beneath my feet. It's all around us now, pulsing in, pulsing out, drawing me toward it.

I know exactly where we need to go. But getting there is another matter.

The air thickens, weighted with memory, pressing against my skin. The walls ripple, shifting as we move. I try to run faster, but it's like wading through muddy water.

We push forward, the corridors twisting open into a vast space.

The Hall of Memories.

Hook stops first. "Alice..."

I stagger to a stop, breath caught in my throat.

The space is impossible—a circular chamber with no ceiling, stretching forever upward. The walls glow, made of shifting panels of light, each one flickering to life as we pass.

"These are... memories?" My voice is barely a whisper. "Thousands of them?"

Some are small—a child's laughter, a fleeting smile, the turn of a page in a book. Others are large—wars fought, love lost, blood spilled across stone floors. I don't dare look too closely.

I don't think Hook does either. We've seen enough.

Then Hook pulls me back. "Alice..."

I turn, slowly.

I feel it now, stronger than before. The heart next to mine, the rhythm pulsing through my ribs.

My breath catches. “Oh my god.”

Hook stands beside me.

One door.

It waits at the far end of the hall, grand and impossibly large, carved with a beating heart split into two. The glow from the walls casts gold and red light across it, shadows moving like they’re alive.

Everything inside me tightens. My body knows.

This is it.

Hook exhales. “Tell me you know how to open it.”

I don’t answer.

I step forward.

And as my hand meets the door, it swings open.

Chapter Eighty-Two

HOOK

THE DOOR SLAMS OPEN, rattling through my bones. Magic leaps from Alice, breaking through whatever tried to hold it shut. We stagger inside, breath heaving.

The room is vast. Suffocating.

The air is thick with magic—dark, cruel, twisted shit. It sinks into my skin and slithers into my lungs like poison. It's wrong, tainted with blood and power.

The whole room is wrong. A place that has seen centuries of suffering and never tired of it. It presses against me, choking, heavy, whispering my name back to me like the room itself knows who I am.

I grit my teeth, tighten my grip on my sword. But it isn't the magic that has my shoulders locked, my chest tight.

It's the throne.

Alice stands beside me, tall and unshaken, her breath drawn slow and steady. I feel her. The same way I feel the pulse beneath my own skin, the pull in the room dragging us both to the same place.

The dais rises at the far end, jagged and uneven, carved from black stone that shifts under the flickering light. The throne is not made.

It is grown.

A monstrous thing, pulled straight from the earth, a twisted crown of bone and stone and thorns. It climbs out of the dais, curling upward in

sharp, clawed edges, every inch of it alive with veins of red light that pulse like a beating heart.

The arms of the throne twist like roots, thick and gnarled, gripping the seat like the throne itself decides who gets to sit on it.

It's not just a chair.

This is magic. This is what powers Wonderland, what beats at the very heart of it.

But it isn't the room or the throne that has me tense, and Alice sucking in a soft gasp. It's what's on top of the dais, on the throne, sitting like she fucking owns the place.

The Queen of Hearts.

A smile curls at her lips, her eyes lighting up as we enter. She's watching us. She's been waiting for us.

"Alice," she says.

Guards flank her sides. At her feet, a man, beaten and broken, his face bloodied, his back lashed, and wrists bound in iron.

Thorn.

But even that scene isn't what gets me. It's the thing in her hand that makes my chest tighten.

The amulet.

My amulet.

Chapter Eighty-Three

ALICE

THE QUEEN OF HEARTS rises from her throne, the amulet swinging from her fingers like a trophy. Like the heart she just ripped from my chest.

My heart pounds against my ribs, but that other heartbeat—the one that's been beating alongside mine—hasn't stopped. Even here, even in this room. It's deeper now, louder, echoing through me, filling my veins with something powerful. Magic. It hums under my skin, calling me forward, demanding justice.

The guards move.

A dozen at least, maybe more. They surge toward us. No hesitation. No warning. Just the thunder of boots against stone and the cold certainty in their eyes.

I step closer to Hook.

He moves closer to me.

His sword lifts, sharp and ready. His grip steady, knuckles white around the hilt. A promise.

I wish I had one.

But I don't need him to protect me. I've beaten the Queen before. I can do it again. The memory of our last confrontation burns in my mind, fuelling my determination.

The guards rush us—not with swords. They aren't here to kill. They're here to subdue. To drag us down. To make us kneel before her, broken and defeated.

One grabs for my arm, fingers digging into my flesh, but I twist, shoving him off. Another reaches for my waist, and I slam my elbow into his ribs, sending him stumbling back. The impact jars through my bones.

Hook moves, his blade flashing as he cuts through them. Silver arcs in the chamber's dim light.

His movements are fast, brutal. Ruthless. No wasted motion, no hesitation.

A pirate who has spent his life in battle. A man who knows that mercy gets you killed.

A guard lunges at him—Hook side steps, their own momentum sending them sprawling across the hard floor. The scrape of armour against stone echoes off the walls.

Another comes from behind. Hook twists, hilt slamming up into their jaw—they drop. Blood spatters across polished boots.

They keep coming, relentless waves of red and black, but Hook fights his way back to me, cutting them down, sending them crashing to the stone. His breathing is controlled, but I can see the sweat beading on his brow, the slight tremble in his shoulders from the effort.

A guard lunges for me again—but Hook is already there. He grabs one of them, knocks him to his knees, and raises his blade. Cold determination in his eyes. The chamber holds its breath.

"Enough." The Queen's voice rings out, cutting through the chaos. "Or I'll end his pathetic life."

A guard has Thorn by the hair, yanking his head back, his throat exposed. The skin there is pale, vulnerable. Thorn's eyes meet mine, wide with fear but burning with defiance.

Hook stops. His whole body goes rigid.

"Oh, God."

The guards seize the moment, surging in, grabbing Hook from behind. His sword clatters to the ground. They force him to his knees. He grunts with the impact, jaw clenched tight against the pain.

More guards grab me, wrenching my arms back until my shoulders scream in protest. "No..."

"Good," the Queen purrs, stepping down the dais, her heels clicking through the room. Each step measured, victorious. "Now we can talk properly."

The magic pulses harder under my skin, responding to her presence. To the wrongness of her on that throne. The heartbeat inside me thunders, a war drum demanding action. But she's too distracted, too certain of her victory to notice the storm brewing inside me.

The guards have us both locked down—but I see it. Hook's shoulders tense. A barely perceptible shift.

I know that look. I've seen it before, right before everything went to hell.

He nods at me. Subtle. Quick. A question and a plan all at once.

I shake my head. *Not yet.* Too many guards. Too much at risk.

But he smirks at me. That godforsaken smirk that says he's already made up his mind. That says he's about to do something monumentally stupid and brave.

"Hook—" My voice breaks on his name, a warning and a prayer.

Too late. He throws his head back, skull cracking into the guard behind him. In the same motion, he twists, breaking free. The sound of bone meeting bone echoes through the room.

My guard tightens his grip, fingers digging into bruised flesh, but Hook is already moving. He slams into me, knocking us both sideways. For a moment, we're tangled together, my guard losing his balance, cursing as he stumbles.

Hook's mouth is at my ear, his breath hot against my skin. "Believe, Alice," he whispers.

The words barely have time to sink in before the guards are back on us, tearing him away from me. This time, they're rougher, forcing him down hard enough to crack the stone beneath his knees. The sound makes me flinch.

I lift my hands. I don't need the same restraint. Not when they have Hook like this.

One of the guards grabs his hair, yanking his head back, exposing his throat like they did Thorin. Another drives their fist into his gut. Hook grunts, the impact shuddering through him, but his eyes never leave mine. Then—a blade at his throat. Cold steel against warm skin.

"No. Stop," I say, my voice steady, though I don't feel it. Inside, I'm screaming.

The Queen lifts a hand, and the guard's blade stills, hovering a hair's breadth from Hook's jugular. She moves closer, but she keeps her distance.

She isn't stupid. She knows what I can do. "Quite the feat you've achieved," she murmurs, studying Hook. "Getting the infamous Captain Hook to risk his life for you." Her eyes narrow, watching him like a predator sizing up wounded prey. "Tell me, Captain—what could she possibly have promised you that's worth dying for?"

Hook's lip curls despite the blood smeared across it, red against pale skin. "Fuck you," he growls.

It's my sentiments exactly.

The Queen laughs, tilting her head. The sound is like glass breaking. "Fuck me?" she repeats, mocking. She means to kill him. I see it in her eyes. The cold calculation. The pleasure she'll take in watching his life drain away.

"Please," I say quickly, desperation clawing up my throat. "We don't want anything from you. Just his amulet. That's all we came here for."

She cocks a brow, intrigued. "His amulet?" Then she laughs. She fingers the pendant, swinging it between her fingers. "You still think this belongs to him? Oh, my dear Alice—there's so much you don't understand." She moves closer, and the magic inside me shudders, recoiling from her touch. "You really just want this pathetic little thing?" She lets the amulet dangle, twisting in the dim light. "Fine," she says.

She smiles. A predator's smile. All teeth.

"I'll give it to you."

She clasps it tight, her gaze locking onto mine. "But you give me something I want in return."

My stomach clenches. Ice spreads through my veins.

I don't trust her. I'd be a fool to trust her.

Hook struggles against the guards, muscles straining. "Alice, don't—"

"Silence him," the Queen snaps.

The guard strikes Hook across the face, splitting his lip open. Fresh blood trickles down his chin. His head snaps to the side, but he straightens again, defiant to the end.

"Stop." Magic surges through me, the air crackling around us. The torches flicker, shadows dancing across the walls.

The Queen's eyes gleam. "Oh. Touched a nerve, have I?" She turns, casting a glance toward the dais. "Thorn, bring it to me."

For a moment, Thorn doesn't move. Then, slowly, he pushes himself to his feet. His chains clink. His movements slow, painful. Each step a battle.

It's almost unbearable to watch.

"Whatever this is," I start, but she shakes her head, silencing me with a look.

Thorn stumbles toward a glass case beside the throne. I hadn't noticed it before. Inside it, the crown—twisted metal, black thorns, deep purple gems gleaming. It pulses, beating with the same rhythm as my racing heart. Calling to me.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" The Queen watches as Thorn lifts the case, stepping toward us. I see it in his eyes. Something's wrong. The Queen smirks. "The crown repels anyone who isn't the rightful owner," she says. "It doesn't burn dear Thorn here, but it does make him... uncomfortable."

Thorn sets it down. His hands tremble, blood smeared across them. Raw, open wounds where the crown's thorns have pierced his skin.

He meets my gaze, just for a second.

A silent warning.

My heart pounds. The magic beneath my skin surges, reaching for the crown.

"I don't understand."

I look at the Queen, at the crown, at Hook— "What does this have to do with me?"

"Give it to me," the Queen says. "Concede to me. Bow before me and declare me your queen. I will give you the amulet."

"Don't listen to her," Hook grits out, his voice rough, strained. Blood bubbles at the corner of his mouth. The guard strikes him again, a brutal hit that makes him stumble. He barely catches himself, buckling, but he's still fighting. "Don't listen to her, Alice. She's—"

"Silence," the Queen snaps, her eyes flashing with fury. The word cracks like a whip.

The guard yanks Hook's head back, pressing the blade harder to his throat. A thin red line of blood appears, sharp and vivid against his skin.

"Stop. Don't." The words spill from me, unbidden, my heart slamming against my ribs. "You can have this. It isn't mine anyway." But even as I say it, something deep inside protests, a silent scream of denial.

The Queen's lips curl into a smile. Victory glints in her eyes. "Then bow to me."

She holds the amulet out, dangling it between her fingers. Light catches on the metal, making it shimmer with an otherworldly glow.

"Bow to me and vow your loyalty. Concede."

It would be so easy.

I could do it.

The crown in the case means nothing to me.

And the amulet means everything to Hook.

But my pulse beats faster, mine and the one that isn't mine. And suddenly, part of me doesn't want to kneel. I want to lift the crown, but I don't want to give it to her. I want to put it on my own head. The urge is overwhelming, a compulsion that burns through my veins. And that makes no sense.

"You want me to pick up the crown and give it to you," I say, stalling. Thinking. Calculating. My mind races, searching for a way out. "What if I can't touch it? What if I—"

She tilts her head, studying me. And then she laughs. A cruel, mocking laugh that echoes off the stone walls. "Oh, Alice, you pathetic little girl. After all this time, you don't even see it? You don't even know?"

"I..." My throat tightens, constricting around the words. "I don't know what? I don't understand."

Everything happens at once.

Thorn lurches forward. His chains rattle as he moves, his hand flying up, grabbing the amulet from the Queen. He throws it away from her. Maybe his intention was to Hook, but it goes wide, arcing through the air.

The queen's scream cuts through the room, her rage tangling with the magic in the air, her hands snapping up, dark power crackling at her fingertips. The air itself seems to bend around her fury.

It erupts from her palms, slamming into Thorn's chest. "You stupid fool." The impact throws him backwards, his body smashing into the wall with a sickening crack. The force of it rattles the room, dust raining down.

But it's enough. Enough for Hook to break free. He rips himself from the guard's grip, shoving his elbow into his captor's face and spinning free. Bone crunches beneath the impact, blood spraying. He lunges, fists flying, punching his way forward, cutting a path toward me. He reaches the crown's case just as another guard moves in.

Hook dodges, fast and brutal, his boot slamming into the glass, shattering it completely. The sound is like ice breaking. He grabs the crown, yanks it from its velvet cushion, and turns to me. A guard swings for him, but he's already moving. Already bringing the crown to me. He

shoves it onto my head. "You are the rightful queen," he says. His voice rough with certainty, with a truth I didn't know existed.

I freeze.

"No." But it doesn't matter. Whatever I have to say dies as power rips through my body. Magic explodes from me. It bursts outward, raw and instinctive, knocking every guard close to us off their feet. They crash into the stone, slammed to the floor like nothing more than dolls. The surge of energy is blinding, deafening—a tidal wave of power that has been waiting, sleeping inside me.

I don't even get the chance to react before the Queen's magic collides with mine. But I have no idea what I'm doing. I raise my hands, trying to channel it. Power clashes in the air, a violent, screaming thing, so strong the room itself trembles with it. The walls shake, stones shifting, dust and small debris raining down.

She shrills in rage, her face twisted with hate. "You dare?" she spits. Her hands snap forward, dark lightning crackling at her fingertips. "You are nothing. Nothing." Each word is punctuated with a fresh surge of her dark power.

The amulet gets kicked in the chaos, spinning across the floor, catching the flickering red and gold light. Hook dives for it, his fingers snatching the chain, his grip tightening around the metal. His knuckles white with determination.

I reach for him. "Hook." His name is a plea.

The Queen's magic erupts, lightning in the form of shadow, reaching for us, for everything. It writhes like living darkness, hungry and malevolent.

I try to fight it, but it's everywhere, all at once, a force I don't understand, a force I can barely push against. It's like trying to hold back an ocean with bare hands.

Hook slams the amulet into the ground. A sharp, cracking sound splits the air. Golden dust spills out, swirling around us, glittering in the chaos. Hook's eyes find mine across the room. And I know.

I know what he's doing.

The pixie dust swirls, forming a doorway. Light spills from it, bright and clean against the darkness.

A portal.

Neverland.

The distraction knocks me off balance.

The Queen's power slams into me, knocking me backwards. I roll with it, twisting, trying to fight it off. I reach for the crown on my head. I lift it. She can have it. We just have to get free.

Hands grab me. He stops me taking it off. "This is yours. You are the rightful Queen." He's yanking me back. "This is how it has to be. This ... is how you save Wonderland." His eyes burn with desperate intensity. He pushes me toward the portal—shoves me through it. A blast of cold slams against my skin. I stumble forward, the pull of the portal wrapping around me, dragging me away—

"Oh god."

She's behind him.

The Queen stands just behind Hook, her face twisted in rage, her power flaring around her like black fire. I go to run back, to stop her—I lift my hand—

Her eyes lock onto mine and she grins at me as she thrusts her hand forward, a jagged bolt of power spearing straight through Hook's side.

His eyes widen. A sharp, startled inhale. Like he doesn't even register what just happened. Like he doesn't believe it. Blood blooms across his shirt, dark and spreading fast.

Neither do I.

"No..." The word tears from my throat, raw and broken.

I grab him, yanking him with me—

And then we're falling.

The End

Epilogue

HOOK

Now, where the hell are we?

The sun beats down hot. Above us, a tree sways, leaves rustling in a gentle breeze. Everything's too bright, too normal. I squint, the light painful after the darkness of the Queen's chamber.

Alice is beside me. She sits up, her clothes torn and filthy. Blood and dust mark her skin like war paint. "I'm home," she says. Her voice barely above a whisper, disbelief coloring each syllable.

She gets up. I try to follow. Pain radiates through my body, but I push against it. Her eyes meet mine, and for a moment, everything stops.

"Hook?"

Pain cuts through my side, sharp and sudden, taking my breath away. Like fire spreading through my veins.

I put my hand inside my jacket. It comes away red, slick with blood. Our eyes lock again, and this time I see the fear creep in. It washes over her face like a shadow.

"Hook...."

"I think she got me. I'm bleeding." I laugh, short and bitter. "Fucking queens. Always have to get the last goddamn word."

The End

Stalk Me

There are three places you can connect with me for free:

- 1 **[Join my Facebook reader group](#)** – This is where I chat, run events, and hang out with my readers. It's a great place to get involved and stay updated.

[Join Here](#)

- 2 **[Sign up for my mailing list](#)** – Don't worry, I won't spam you! I use this list to send updates about my books, what's happening with my writing, and all that good stuff. Plus, you'll get a couple of free books just for signing up!

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- 3 **[Follow me on Patreon](#)** – This is one of my main hangouts, where I post new stories, cover reveals, behind-the-scenes content, and much more. Come and be part of the community!

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Next in the Wonderland Series

Alice and Hook will be back, but in the meantime, why not dive into one of my other series.



books2read.com/bloodslave

In a world ruled by darkness, I find a light in the eyes of a monster

As the annual Blood Auction unfolds, I catch the eye of none other than Seth Hayden, the devastatingly handsome and ruthlessly powerful Vampire King of the North. His cold, piercing eyes lock onto mine, and I know I'm in deep trouble.

Turn the page for a free preview

Blood Slave Preview

CHAPTER ONE

The stench of stale beer and cold smoke hangs heavy in the air, but I don't flinch. I sit, my head held high, eyes scanning the room when I choose to lift them. Six of us remain—six. There were eight when they brought us here. Eight, but two have vanished, and I'm next. I won't cower.

Noises bleed through from the next room—taunts, cheers, and the occasional whimper. I grip the chain draped between my breasts tighter, the metal a cold comfort against my fingers. The gilded crest on the collar around my throat glints in the harsh light, a constant reminder of the house I once belonged to—the house I supposedly shamed.

A young girl sits across from me, perched on the room's sole stool. She can't be more than sixteen, her youth consumed by the darkness of this place. Acne scars and deep circles mar her face, the remnants of innocence lost. She wears only a soiled pink thong, her ribs stark against her pallid skin. Despite her attempts to push out her small chest, her nipples remind me of tiny, shrivelled seeds, devoid of life.

"Like what you see?" she rasps, catching me looking.

"You shouldn't be here," I respond, my voice steady.

An older woman starts, her voice a cruel whip, "And where should she be, princess? Back home with her family, playing dress-up? You think this is a game?" She turns her blood-red lips towards me, sneering. "You think Daddy's going to ride in on his white horse and save you, little girl? Wake up. This is reality."

I meet her gaze, unyielding. “You don’t know me, and you don’t know what I’m capable of.”

The woman scoffs but turns away, unwilling to engage further. The lock on the iron door clanks open, revealing a brutish man with a tattoo snaking up his left arm. His knuckles spell out 'love' and 'hate' in stark black letters.

“You,” he grunts, pointing at me. “On the block.”

A chill snakes down my spine, but I stand, gathering the heavy chain in my hands. I don’t bother trying to cover my breasts. Let them see the 'goods.' I won’t shrink away, not anymore.

The man leads me up narrow steps to a circular platform. A small bowl sits on the floor, and I drop my chain into it, the clatter echoing through the silent room. I stand with my hands on my hips, chin raised.

“Twenty-three years old,” a disembodied voice announces. “Blood type A. Offered today by Crevan Dubois. Starting bid is one hundred thousand. Reserve set at five hundred thousand.”

I scan the room, taking in the men leering at me. Ten of them, each exuding wealth and power. One man sits forward, his eyes locked onto mine. His lips are slightly parted, the tips of his fangs visible. He exudes a dark allure, but I won’t be ensnared.

“One million,” he says, not breaking eye contact.

My pulse quickens, but I keep my expression impassive. The bids climb, each man trying to outdo the last. The room hums with tension.

“Five million,” a man behind me shouts.

The fanged man stands, stalking to the edge of the stage. His presence commands the room, silencing the others. “Ten million,” he declares, his voice a low growl. “In cash.”

The room falls silent. My heart hammers in my chest, but I keep my composure. I won’t show fear, not even as the man at the control panel declares, “Sold.”

I’m not weak. I won’t be broken. This is only the beginning, and I will fight—no matter the cost.

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About the Author

Mason lives in the small town of Thornton in the northwest of England, nestled between the coast and the river, giving him the best of both worlds. He lives with his wife, his dog Lexi, and two cats, Deana and Castiel. There was a Sam, but she sadly crossed the rainbow bridge.

Mason has been a writer since he was old enough to hold a pencil (pens were off-limits back then), always creating stories and imagining them in his head. Now, he shares those worlds with his readers.

When he's not writing, Mason loves playing World of Warcraft, getting lost in a good book, travelling to new places, and hanging out with his children and family.

